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In a small room I wait

Melissa Madore MDRMEL001

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This work has not been previously submitted in whole, or in part, for the award of any degree. It is my own work. Each significant contribution to, and quotation in, this dissertation from the work, or works, of other people has been attributed, and has been cited and referenced.

Signature:

Date:

Me. Watch me. It's me. Can you see me? Look I am running now, and I can run fast, as fast as a car, you don't believe me? Watch me. Now, I am going to throw this ball to you, are you going to catch it? Catch it. Don't let it fall. Don't let it fall.

PART ONE

Be careful you said, close all the windows and the doors because you could hear it, a storm was near. *Watch it! Or a lightning bolt will get in, and find you. Find you.* You have heard of this before. Back in the days when you lived in the valley lightening came right above striking a boy. *That's right, and he fried him like a chicken. Like a chicken.*

I am afraid.

I am afraid of you.

I am afraid for you.

Last week, I found you crouched in the back seat of my car. Loud thunder crashed during the night, flashes of light in the sky; the storm must have been just above us and I woke up, but more because of a feeling, a presentiment, and this is when I saw the lights outside and I knew they were coming from a car, only they were not fading away in the distance. So I went out and I found you, *it's the safest place*, you said. You were crying and I did not touch you.

'Mother' I tried, but was afraid to upset to you. 'Mother, it's over. Listen. Outside, there is only the rain.'

You listened to the steady pace: the storm had passed and I brought you back inside.

Seasons are strange here, distinct but moody where there can be snow the day before, but the next day a hot sun burns it all away, birds hurry to return, buds start swelling on the branches. Now, it's difficult to say. There are dark clouds building over the mountain, cascading over the sides, but somehow dissolving half-way, never reaching the bottom and I watch their movement, and the way the sky is so radically divided; dark and menacing far above, but perfectly clear around me.

Frankie? 'Frankie come here. Frank was the name of my father, but you always called him Frankie. I look straight into your eyes: they are pale now, like the rest of you. On

the floor lies the book that you threw at me because it was a sad story. The soup I have brought you has gone cold. The bread has gone dry. You won't eat anything with him.

The most distressing silence is always the one that comes after turmoil, and I was, and still am, not ready for it. Annabelle said it is because I feel the need to be responsible for something that I came to live with you. But she wouldn't know how it is. She doesn't come to see you often because she is too afraid, and it has always been difficult for her. She always lived her life withdrawn from all of us: we never caught her on the toilet seat, never found nail clippings or strands of hair on the bathroom floor like the rest of us. She never left anything of herself anywhere, as if all of this would make us possess her in some way and she would not allow it. And she often pretended to live the life of someone else. To be someone else. She would create a scene, a fight: 'I hate you, the whole of you.' And we would recognise the words of a woman we overheard in a queue. I think she did it for its own sake, but perhaps it was also because she found the words were better than her own.

She did not say a word when she saw father on the hospital bed, but she shook like the deer I have once come across while hunting with father when I was only a child (well I was never allowed to hold the gun, but I could watch.) We found ourselves standing next to a little deer, so close, I said: 'Shoot it. C'mon daddy, shoot it.'

It is not that I don't have the slightest pity for animals, but you know how children are. And anyway we didn't shoot it because it was too small, and it was shaking so much.

'What's wrong?' I said. 'Is the deer sick?'

'It happens if a deer gets scared,' he said. 'First it runs away, this one might have just escaped from another hunter, then, it hides somewhere and shakes for a while. After it forgets and it is as if nothing had happened, as if it had not just escaped death. And that is how they survived.'

She wanted to touch him, but it was too late already; he had gone cold. 'You should have gotten rid of it all,' she said, and by this she meant all his suits, the woollen blanket in which he used to cover himself, the winter coat in the wardrobe. It was what was driving you mad because his smell was everywhere and it was as if he was still here. I did give away a lot of things, but I could not bring myself to discard everything as if he had never existed. A part of me did not want to forget. Even if it hurt me, I still wanted to hold on to something,

anything that came from him. The worst for me had been his face: the absence of expression on it, still, lifeless like a table. He was gone.

‘Look, he was smiling,’ that is what a nurse told me while putting a hand on my shoulder. But death is not like this, it is rarely graceful. Remember the cat Annabelle had as a child? It was a big cat with a bright orange fur, what was its name again? It doesn’t matter, when it was run over by a car one night you said to her: ‘We will bury it in the garden and maybe you can put a seed with it and a flower will grow over its resting place.’

The next day the land turned to mud and the cat resurfaced with ghoul eyes, worms wiggling out of its side. I thought about this when I saw him. The nurse came to me and she said: ‘He left peacefully,’ but I knew it had be arranged. You see truth is better when coated. And so is death.

Then we had to decide what to do with the body. Annabelle said we should have him cremated, but I knew a man who had lost his wife a few years ago, he was a thorough man, and he had told me: ‘You know, before cremating my wife I wanted to know the truth, the real truth.’

So he had gone to the crematorium to discover that the box of ashes they gave to the family after cremation is not in fact the whole body, but only a handful.

‘Nobody can be contained in the little box they give you,’ he said, ‘the rest is swept away God knows where.’

And that is why when his wife passed away he followed the whole cremation process very carefully. He asked the employer to sweep the inside of the crematorium entirely because he did not want his wife to burn with anyone else, then he watched them thrust the coffin in, waited until it cooled down and the entire inside was swept out and what he got back was in fact a whole cake-tin full, not as plain and smooth as the ashes they gave to the family: it contained bits and morsels too from the coffin and perhaps something else. This was the truth. But at least he felt satisfied, he said, because he took the whole of her with him. When he went to collect the rest, the official ashes (the employee insisted on scooping a hand full aside to follow procedure), a woman at a counter pushed a white stapled envelope, he had not wanted to pay for the wooden box, and said: ‘Here’s your stuff.’ Here’s your stuff.

So I had him buried in the cemetery behind the Cathedral. I thought you would want this. You were already sick then. You said: *Oh my God, Oh my God, it is true*, when I brought you to the hospital to see him, but then you went into a frenzy, the nurse said they must sedate you, I agreed. When you woke up, you called for him again, *Frankie for God sake! Close the window I am turning to ice in here, it is so cold in this house*, and you cursed him when he failed to do so.

It is a pretty cemetery you know, small and quaint, and the grass is covered with little purple flowers. It must be because of all the people buried there; all of this is good for the soil. And every Sunday they ring the bells at the cathedral, it is one of the few places in town where they still hold mass. All the other churches have been turned into concert halls and restaurants a few years ago. People said it was the price Catholicism paid because it told people for too long what to do. The churches kept their towers, their stained-glass windows and their copper bells, but there were signposts on their lawn with the word 'sold' in bulky red letters; they no longer belonged to God. Some of them looked as if they desperately held on, gothic in style, with large arcs protruding from their sides as if clutching the ground, as if they somehow had a soul. Maybe then the people felt a shadow of guilt when they looked at them, but it surely did not last long because guilt had been abused too much and people were quick to look the other way. You liked the sound of the church bells so much that father used to take you to the Cathedral for you to hear them. He was nice like this, always trying to please you even if it meant driving across town just to hear the ringing of some bells. But sometimes he was tired. I remember him saying: 'It's not music anyway, it's an order.' 'The sound of blame, a scolding finger tapping on a forehead.'

'It doesn't matter,' you said, because you liked their deep calls. Every time it was like something ended and it was the beginning of something else. Like if everything was possible again.

I never quite understood what brought you to this little town. Father was from the West Coast where the weather was warmer, and there were mountains, large forests, peach and cherry orchards, it must have been strange to come here and face the fierce cold, when you don't know any better this is one thing, but when you know there are warmer winds blowing on the other side, I wonder if he ever resented you. You grew up in the valley, on a farm, with large yellow fields under your feet and a land so even you could see far ahead when the sky was clear—sometimes you could see all the way across the provincial border.

But when your father died you left and never went back. How old were you then? Twenty or so? You never spoke about it and now you have started to forget. Perhaps, it is not a bad thing.

Was it all the churches that attracted you here? Did you find the peace you yearned for so deeply? You said that you used to go from church to church to pick the confetti spread on the lawn, the flowers that fell from the corsages, the ribbons, lace, and once you even found a diamante earring. Then, you collected anything that you found on the streets — from matchboxes, to rocks, to old coins. You even found a drawing, a chalk work depicting a very well-drawn Chinese girl in her traditional dress. You liked it because everything about it was foreign, —the stroke of the chalk, the colour—and you imagined it had come all the way from across the seas. You kept it rolled up like a precious parchment with a piece of rope around it and it made you smile every time you recovered it because it was a day you remembered clearly: the spring sun, the white sky, the peonies peeking through the fence where you had found it. All of this would never be lost. And this was exactly the purpose of these objects: they were your memories, strings attaching you to your past. Each of them associated with one specific event. It did not need to be significant, you favoured trivial things, and sometimes it was just a thought, a feeling even. Like the feeling of nostalgia that overcame you on gloomy autumn days because of an old song playing on the radio, the sight of a woman sweeping the leaves from her porch, the chill in the air. You picked a leaf and kept it pressed between the pages of a book, and it all came back to you every time you came across it. You still have it, here at the top of the shelf, but you no longer look at it and when I showed it to you, you shrugged your shoulders; it did not mean anything to you anymore.

You forced us to go to church every week when we were children and I hated it. I think it was not so much because of faith, but tradition, a ritual that kept you sane like the gelato from the little corner shop during the heat-waves in the summer. ‘The real thing,’ you always said. Every Sunday, it was the same. It did not matter how the week had been, if we had other plans, even if I had a sleep over at a friend’s house you would come and pick me up to take me to church. I was convinced that even if the earth was suddenly to tear open there would still be mass. And lime gelato.

But one day, you stopped going to church. I was older then, too old for you to dictate what I must do and I had, myself, long given up on mass. For you, it just happened.

Somewhere along the way, you lost the faith or the meaning of it. It was true for a lot of people and that is when the churches slowly started to become deserted.

When you got sick, I brought you to the cathedral. I thought it might have some kind of influence on you, that it would somehow waken you. But it didn't. You screamed, covered your ears with your hands. People circled us, a look of pity on their faces, and I realised that nothing would really be possible for you again.

I can piss the farthest out of all my friends. We had a play-off yesterday and I won. I suppose it is because I practice a lot. My father always tells me the more you do a thing, the better you become. The other day I stood on the edge of my lawn and aimed for the wall just across the road and I reached it. When I drew close, I saw the dark stain on the paint, and I smelled it too. I was proud. I hope it does not rain any time soon because I like the idea that it is there and that I am the only one who knows about it. My dick measures exactly three aligned dollar coins when erect. Paul's one measures four. Sam two. I think that means I'm average.

My mother is slicing some apples and I know they are for me because she is peeling the skin off. I never eat the skin of anything. When she cooks a chicken she makes sure there is no sign of it anywhere near my plate: she peels the tomatoes, even the peas if this is what she is serving, because I do want the peas, just not the skin. With oranges, I only eat the pulp inside because there is not only the thick orange skin covering it, but also the white skin stuck underneath it, and the translucent layer over the flesh. She peels the thick one first, then makes a little incision at the top and lifts the translucent skin off by using her fingers like a little pincer (as I sometimes do with blisters) and I eat the bare slice that bursts with juice in my mouth.

'Here you are my angel.'

She puts the plate of apples in front of me and I wolf it down because I know soon they will turn yellow and I don't like it when this happens. The bus is going to be here soon. The big bus. Bus. Bus. Bus. I like buses because they are like long stretched cars. We had my eleventh birthday in the bus. A red one. I told mother I

was too old for this, but she insisted. I did not say anything, because I did not want to upset her. The bus took us all around the city and my mother brought a cake, on it there was a picture of another bus made of icing, but the heat melted it and the bus fell off the cake and when mother served it, the icing had dripped to the side, the colour mixed and it turned brown, but she gave me the only piece where the icing was almost intact and a wheel that was made of liquorice. Charlie threw up. Then, Jenny. And Paul. I heard their mother saying the bus was a stupid idea.

We gave everyone a little surprise bag and in it there were two cars, three liquorice sticks, a packet of lifesavers, a water gun, and a plastic ring with a big red candy at the top (for the girls). Jenny put it on her finger and she pretended she was married to Paul. Then, I saw her sucking it as if it was a dummy. She said she was a baby now, and Paul was the father. It was when we passed the shopping mall she threw up. She said she got car-sick sometimes. We had to stop the bus and pull to the side because everyone was getting sick. Later Paul said to me he only threw up because of Jenny. I said it did not change anything because my birthday was spoiled and that if he was really sorry, maybe he should give me his water gun (he got lucky, he got the one that looks like a machine gun with a huge water container) then maybe, I would consider being his friend again. But his mother heard me and she said: 'you have to share.'

Sharing is caring. That is what my teacher always says. But since I really didn't care, I supposed I didn't really have to share. I nicked the gun while he slipped his head out of the window to look at a big yellow crane.

When I get to school Paul asks me if I want to play kissing games with him and Anna. Martin and Sophie are playing already: Anna is running around with puckered lips trying to kiss Martin. If we are kissed, we become the kisser. I tell Paul I don't feel like playing, and he says that maybe we could play basketball instead because there is no one using the ball. But I say no and he says I am boring. So I tell him that maybe he can come to my house tonight and we can smoke cigarettes.

My mother never liked the fact that my father was a smoker and one day she decided that she did not want him to smoke in the house anymore. He said it was

ridiculous because it was his home too. She said: 'Try me.' My father did not say anything after this. He went and smoked in the garden. In our garden we grow vegetables: tomatoes, pumpkins, lettuce, spinach and beans. We divided the garden in equal portions and I was allowed to choose some of the vegetables we were to grow as long as I ate them later on. I planted beans because it was part of a science project at school, but the pumpkin plant next to it grew so big that it invaded my section of the garden. When I told my mother about it, she said it did not matter. I told her it was because it was *her* pumpkin plant, that if it was *my* beans taking over *her* space, she would do something about it. She said fine and she cleaned my patch and tore the pumpkin growth away, but a few weeks later my bean plant died. Mother said: 'Maybe if your father did not leave his cigarette butts everywhere after smoking in the garden, your plant would have survived.'

Paul is very excited about the idea. I tell him he can meet me after school and I will have cigarettes with me. I know there is a pack hidden in the tin box at the top of the kitchen shelf. My father kept one there. Once, he caught me watching him taking a cigarette from the tin and he said: 'Don't tell your mother. It will be our little secret'. And I did not tell her because I liked to have a little secret with my father. But mother knew about the tin. She said that father was not a very 'meticulous' man. When I asked her about it she said it meant to be careful. Paul is afraid that we might get caught tonight. I tell him he does not have to worry because we will be very meticulous. He looks at me and raises his eyebrow. I give him a proud smile.

I still work at the nursery across the road, but now I am the only one there. I had been working there just over two years when the owner went overseas and left the business entirely in my hands. I take pride in my work and that is why I never hear from him. I always clean my tools perfectly the night before, I scrub the silver bucket well under water, and I wipe off all the dirt from the shovels and the pitchfork. The planting of a medium-sized garden takes me about three hours. If a client orders me around, I threaten never to return. Tools can spread parasites, diseases: people often ignore this. They know very little about the moods of nature. They want to get rid of pests, but feed them with their backyard.

I was at this woman's place the other day. She lived on the 5th floor of an apartment block and she had furnished her balcony with large pot plants and containers trying her best to make her small dwelling a home. It would have been lovely with flowers in the flower boxes, fat lettuce bundles in the containers, basil, tomatoes, strawberries, but all of it was dead: half-eaten leaves, flowerless pots, there was nothing left. I knew the cause of it of course: I lifted a leaf, picked at the caterpillar that curled itself into a spiral.

'Here,' I said.

She touched it with the tip of her fingers, sighed, 'Well I'll have butterflies then. I like butterflies.'

Only it was a moth caterpillar. A client once told me that in French moths are called *papillons de nuit*. Night butterflies. I told her this, but she threw all the plants in the fire. People care about the name of things.

You would have made a scene out of this. And so would Claire. Did I tell you that I once found a cockroach behind the bread-box back at my apartment and she would not let me kill it?

'Take it outside,' she said.

'But it's going to come back.'

She would not have any of it because it was a living thing, she said, like you and me. Like you, and me. She trapped it in a glass jar, and released it the garden. During the night, I went to the toilet and I found it the bath. I stamped it with my foot and it made a crunching sound just like the sweet I had eaten earlier on, the paper was still in my pocket, and I pinched it by its legs and I threw it outside.

You never liked Claire. You said there was something false about her, but still she was constantly nice to you. She was a hairdresser and often she came and did your hair over the week-end. She told you she could read scalps as fortune-tellers read cards, and she could tell if a woman was pregnant, even if someone was ill. In fact, once she told a client he should see a doctor, there was something strange about his hair and it turned out he had cancer. He died a year later. I wonder if she would have been able to see what was happening to you. She said the shape of a scalp revealed a lot about someone.

'Let me read yours,' she told you once and ran her fingers through your hair. Your head was small and round, she said it meant you liked mornings.

‘Mornings?’

‘Yes, mornings. Mornings, nights, or both. And there are two sides of you.’

‘This is ridiculous,’ you said and looked at me with eyes that said you did not approve of her.

Once, a woman had come to her with a request. She had arrived early in the morning, already waiting at the door. It was a small woman and Claire already knew she was sick just by the look of her. Claire worked on her hair and the woman did not say much at first, only she saw my picture on the desk and she asked if we were married and then said: ‘I have been married once. A long time ago. I was young and we had been dating for seven years. Marriage was on everybody’s mind around us, expect ours. Then, out of nowhere, he asked me. A month later he came back late at night with a face so serious that I knew. He looked miserable. Perhaps the remorse too was a lie, he said, it was inevitable. A desire set off by a desperate attempt to measure the legitimacy of his feeling for me; I broke off the engagement and he had flowers delivered to my house every week for a year after this, but eventually it stopped and I heard later on that he got married.’

‘I am dying,’ she said.

She wanted Claire to help her.

‘You know what I am the most afraid is to be a stranger at my own funeral. Like my old aunt and the fake rosy cheeks, her hair combed to the side. She never wore her hair like this because she always parted her hair right in the middle—she took hold of her fringe—like this. It was all so different. So wrong.’

‘Help me,’ she said. ‘Come to the funeral, come ahead of time, and make sure they don’t make a mess out of me.’

‘Why me?’

‘Because you are a good hair dresser. And you don’t know me, so you won’t try to make me the way you think I should be, but just the way I am.’

I was always fascinated by the way Claire spent her days, working her hands on strangers’ heads, rubbing their scalp, raking her fingers through their hair as if it was nothing. The fake intimacy lasted as long as the cut and then she would say ‘have a good day’ and all was over as if nothing had happened. I wanted to ask her about it, how she felt, maybe even what it turned her into, but for the most part, she said she felt empowered by it: men and women offering (and lowering), their head so willingly on the edge of a ceramic basin. If

they were stiff, or uneasy, she patted their hair down for a while until they settled on the chair. Just like her father did with his chickens: holding their head firmly in the hollow of his arm and stroking their back before breaking their neck.

‘You don’t want the chicken to die stiff,’ he used to tell her. ‘It makes the meat tough.’

She said the chicken neck dropped down like a wilted stem.

At first, I never wanted to sleep at Claire’s place. I said her bed was too itchy, and it was true. I was convinced there must be fleas crawling on me, itching, biting, sucking my blood.

‘Fleas?’ she said, ‘there are no fleas.’

I think the truth was that I was afraid to fall asleep and wake up during the night panicked by the things around me: a wall too close, a curtain brushing my arm, a strange unfamiliar space.

Claire lived in a large and sunny apartment in the old part of town, not far from the cathedral. The main road was a few metres away and often we walked down stopping at the coffee shops, or strolling through the garden in front of the city hall. I still sometimes find myself taking a detour just to walk past her old building. I peeked through the window, a couple lives there now. They have put flower pots on the balcony, a wind-chime hangs above the door and there is a sign that reads ‘home sweet home’. It looks different, almost uncanny. Claire is gone, and there are no traces of us left. The space belongs to someone else and I suppose if I really wanted too, I could make us disappear. As if everything had been just a fantasy of mine.

The first time she came to the nursery she wore a sweater made of thin fabric pulled tight against her chest and I remember mentally tracing the outlines of her breasts, the contours of her nipples, over and over, like a compulsive portraitist. She had come to buy plants for her apartment. There was a certain detachment about her, a kind of naiveté and I found myself attracted to her. At first, she strolled around without paying me much attention, but then turned around and looked straight back at me. She had dark eyes, almost black. Her stare, it was like she saw through me: the vision I had of our intertwined bodies on the floor, the twigs in her hair, the imprint of the uneven cement on her legs. All of this, she had seen I told myself, and I found it hard to face her. Like looking back at someone you just imagined

killing. But she smiled. And for me that meant consent. Or proof that she saw nothing, either way, the guilt left me.

She stopped in front of the roses.

‘They are always a firm favourite,’ I said. But she walked away. She did not like roses.

‘Everybody likes roses.’

But she said they were too complicated, too symbolic; roses for love, roses for friendship, roses for best wishes and for envy, roses as a pat on the back or as a passionate go-ahead.

‘It’s confusing.’

I said it was people who made it complicated because in truth, they were by far the easiest flower to graft; they rooted on almost anything. They would start to root right on the counter if the stem was kept moist.

‘It’s a shame,’ she said. Once she read on the wall of a toilet in a park, ‘God created roses in the likeness of a woman.’ Next to it, ‘Megan sucked my dick.’ She knew Megan. And she thought she knew God.

In the summer, we would swim at the dam. She never touched the bottom because, she said, the rocks were too sharp. In truth the rocks were soft and silky, polished by the water, coated in mud, but still, she would not touch bottom. She walked on her toes or hung with her legs around my hips. Once, we saw a snake. I remember it clearly: the strands of hair stuck to her face, the pace of our breath, the deep kisses. I was convinced she was going to let me have her in the water, but she screamed and ran out. I turned around and I saw the snake wiggling its way towards the middle of the water. It was harmless: there were no poisonous snakes in this part of the country. But what came as a surprise to me was the way she pushed me out of the way to get to the shore. In my mind, she always had been a different kind of woman, but she did everything to get away, and almost did not warn me. She said she had been afraid. I should have known she would leave someday.

Paul is waiting for me by the door. It is light outside because it is spring. In the winter, the sun sets early, but now it will be bright for a while although there are

big grey clouds covering the sky. I slip my hands into my pocket and feel the cigarette box. A jolt of adrenaline hits my stomach. We head for the woods, passing in front of the old woman's house. She has a huge garden at the front, and one day, as I passed by, I craved for those fat rhubarb stems growing like weeds next to her wall. I like their sourness and the way they make my tongue prickle. Before eating it, I always lick the tip and dip it in a lot of sugar. I did not want to steal, because I knew it was not a good thing, so I thought, maybe I could just ask. Mother always tells me: 'It is amazing the things you can get with a smile.' I knocked lightly on the door and a tall woman with tight curly hair opened. I said that I would very much like some rhubarb and I was wondering if she would please allow me to have a piece. I had asked very politely. And I smiled broadly. She looked at me with large bright eyes, I waited for the tender words, but she said I could not have any because she needed it to make jam. Fuck. Her lawn was full of it, and I had been so nice, and I only wanted to take one stem, because I liked rhubarb, but not that much. There was a large rock by the door; I saw myself picking it up and flinging it into her face. Hit her hard. Hurt her. Leave a mark. She watched me as I bit my lips, tightening a fist in my pocket. I said 'Fuck you,' and ran home. Later, I came back with a pair of scissors and cut out the biggest stem I could find. I hid in the woods. I savagely bit into the rhubarb. I ate it all until I could not feel the prickle on my tongue anymore, until I felt ill.

Paul says the road is clear. We get into the woods, and find ourselves a spot next to a large rock. Something brittle snaps under my feet. Paul draws a breath.

'It's only glass,' I say.

There are a few broken beer bottles on the ground, and some stones are covered in soot. Someone has lit a fire here some time ago. We sit by the rock and I see that there are fiddle-heads around us and I tell Paul that my mother picks them and uses it in salad so I tear a piece off and hand it to him.

'Try,' I say.

He looks at me, confused.

'In your mouth. You can chew it.'

He rubs the piece under his nose, puts it on the tip of his tongue. I see him crushing it between his teeth, but then, spitting it out, a long filament of green saliva dripping from his mouth.

'It's bitter,' he says.

I laugh. Paul used to eat anything. When he was younger, he ate ants, he said they tasted peppery. But all of this has changed now. He is getting more afraid of everything. I get the pack of cigarettes out of my pocket, it is half empty. I draw one cigarette from the box for myself and give one to Paul. I also found a matchbox in the tin. I scratch the match but too hard and the tips breaks. I try again. And again. It smells weird and the last stroke makes a wisp of smoke and gets into my eyes. My eyes are stinging, but still there is no fire.

'Give it to me' Paul says.

He grabs it from my hands, scratches the match once and fire appears. He looks at me: 'Boy scout training,' he says and gives me a wink.

We each try to take a puff but it feels like glass in my throat. Paul says we have to take another one, so we do. I feel really sick, and I want to throw up so I crouch beside the tree, but I see something is moving, I hear a noise. Someone is coming. Paul hears it too and he pushes in front of me.

'Hurry,' he says.

We sprint out of the woods and I hear someone say, 'It's only fucking kids.' When we eventually get back to the street we are breathing heavily. Dusk has started to spread over the mountains. The colour of the sky has started to fade. I tell him that we must try it again sometime.

This morning, a bird flew into the window. It was a nice-looking bird, larger than a chicken, with a soft brown patterned body and a white ring around its neck. Its head was a brilliant green.

'There're early,' you said as you watched it peck at the lawn.

'I don't think this kind of bird ever goes away,' I said because the bird was a kind of pheasant and I was almost convinced they stayed during the winter.

'No, they leave. It's too cold for them out here. The sun is warm today, don't you think? It feels like summer. Up in the mountain, there'll be berries.'

It made me sad, all of the random words you spoke to me; I am nothing but a stranger to you now, a man with whom you can discuss the weather.

I did not have any bread for the bird so I waved my hand pretending to throw something for it to eat. It worked, the bird was lured and it came closer and eventually it strolled onto the porch expecting to find something, the imaginary crumbs I had thrown for it. It was nervous, yet it seemed to become tamer because it probably needed to feed. I opened the door and at first the bird took a few steps back, then, it came inside, close to your feet.

‘Look it likes you,’ I said thinking it would please you because you always liked animals so much.

It was something you and Claire shared. Every time she came you left apples at the front door for the racoons and if you heard them, even if it was during the night, you slipped out of bed, woke Claire up and the two of you watched the racoons silently devour the apples, held them between their paws looking so much like little hands: ‘Look how agile they are,’ you would say. It made me happy to see the two of you getting along, even if I knew it would be short-lived.

But you did not want the bird close to you, you said: ‘Get it out!’ ‘Get it out!’ Your voice was weak and shaky, but still it startled the bird and it flapped its wings and flew around and around the room before perching on a beam, standing there for a while, just looking at us. It was frightened.

‘Come,’ I said opening the front door for it to escape. ‘Come.’

The bird took off, but headed for the top window near the ledge. This window was always shut. We heard the sickening blow and the bird fell onto the floor. It had hit the window hard, it gave a few erratic shakes, and then, it was still. I felt it with the tip of my foot.

‘Don’t worry,’ I said. ‘I will dig a hole for it in the garden, I will bury it.’ I picked the bird up with the dust pan, but it was hard to lift; death is heavy. I took it to the backyard, and I buried it close to the surface, scooped a little bit of dirt over it and covered it with some grass. I came back to the house.

‘Wash your hands,’ you said, and you shook your head.

I knew you would be distraught because before your father committed suicide you said there was an owl on the roof. ‘An owl, can you believe it?’ It was a coincidence of

course, but still, it is hard not to see something into it. Your mother had left—said she needed some freedom and left the children, you and your sister, to the care of your aunt. So your father moved in with his brother and stayed there for almost a year. When it was clear your mother was not coming back, his brother's wife said, 'You know, you can't stay here forever, you have to get on with your life.'

She was not being difficult, not even selfish, she was right, he had to move on, and that is what he did. Only, he could not imagine anything else. Imagine. Yes, he failed to imagine another life. Ahead there was only confusion, a mind refusing to build images of a future. It was his brother who found him, a pool of blood at his feet in the basement, a rifle by his feet. You were nineteen at the time, and you had to put the blame on someone, so it was all because of her, because of your mother. You never really spoke about it, you always just said that grandfather died a 'terrible death' until I was old enough and I asked you. Even then I think you told me he died because of unforeseen circumstances. Or maybe you did tell me, because somehow, when I asked you later, I thought I might have already known. Memory is strange like this.

It was Claire who made me think about him one day because she was very close to her grandparents.

'He put a bullet through his head,' you said. 'Because of your grandmother.'

And that was it. You would not say anything else. It was raw and resentful, to the point. I sometimes wished you would have said something else because of the picture I conjured for myself. In my mind I saw a man with blood-shot eyes, a deep hole in his forehead, arms spread open like Jesus on the cross. I guess all these years of going to church seeing those martyr idols on the wall had left its trace; and there was blood everywhere. And I saw a woman, with long silver hair, she too did not have a face, but I knew who she was. She looked at me and smiled.

It was not like this, I know, but I could not help it. Grandmother passed away a few years later from a heart attack. I was only a baby at the time, but she had not seen me, you did not allow it. You never forgave her and I doubt you ever will. It's never good to have so much resentment. Look at you now. I find it hard to look straight into your eyes. I try to see everything that you were, and what you are now. I have seen pictures of you when you were just a child: a little girl in a yellow dress sitting on a red swing. Did you like to swing high? Did you like the feeling of dizziness if the swing went up very high and dropped back again?

‘Frankie,’ you said. ‘Frankie.’

I want to tell you that he is gone. But I say: ‘Don’t be afraid. Don’t be afraid.’

You look at me for a long time. I can tell you are annoyed with me. I am a liar. And a traitor. I am scared to death these days. I bring you a blanket and wrap it around your shoulders. It smells of father, I know. I am a liar. I am a liar.

Mother cried last night. I woke up because I realised I wanted to wee and I saw her sitting in the living room with her eyes all red. She was holding a glass in her hand.

‘Can’t you sleep my angel?’ she said. ‘Come here.’

She smiled at me and she took me in her arms holding me tight.

‘Oh my angel. I love you so much.’

She was holding me like a baby with my arm stuck behind her back. After a while it started to prickle. She did not smell like the sweet powder she dusted on her skin and on me sometimes. She smelled strange. I tried to pull away, but she would not let me.

‘I have to wee,’ I said and I ran to the bathroom. I did not go back.

My mother has long hair. It is brown but she says the colour is actually auburn. My hair looks just like hers. Sometimes she paints her nails pink. She does it sitting on the couch with a mini paint-brush and I don’t like it because the smell is too strong. At school, girls wanted to wear make-up like their mothers. They spent the whole break time in the bathroom doing their hair, and putting colour on their eyes, on their lips, but one day the teacher said it was enough and they were not allowed to wear lipstick and eye-shadow at school anymore. So they used markers instead. They stained their nails and their lips with the fluorescent markers, and they stole the glitter tubes from the art and craft box. The teacher threw a fit when she saw them and made them scrub their faces until they were red. She removed all the markers from their pencil boxes, and their pens, and she said they would only be allowed to use them under strict surveillance. One girl said: ‘You can’t do this.’ And the teacher said: ‘Try me,’ just like mother.

For breakfast, I have cereal and mother always says I must drink all the milk from my bowl because it is good for my bones, but this morning she does not say anything. We drive to school and I watch her steer the car imagining she is one of those racing car drivers like I have seen on TV. A car streams past us, faster mother I want to tell her, faster take over. Sometimes she plays the game with me and she would say: 'Ok we are first in line, passing Schumacher on the left, hundred yards to the finishing line, hold on my angel, hold on tight, are you ready?' And I smile broadly because I am always ready.

'My angel, you know that mummy loves you?' she said when we get to school. She gives me a long embrace. I don't want to upset her, but I pull myself slowly away because I can see Paul waiting for me by the gate. She is staring at me with wet eyes and I move myself in front of her. I don't want to let anybody see her cry. My stomach is burning and now I want to cry too, but Paul is here. Look mother, Paul is here, but I don't say anything. She wipes the tears from her face and I look away pretending I have seen nothing.

'My angel?' she says.

I turn around and look at her with big bright eyes.

'Have a nice day ok?'

I nod my head and run down the hill.

'Run,' says Paul when I get to him and he pulls roughly at my shirt.

'Watch it' I want to say, but he has gone already and when I look back I see Lisa coming from behind. Fuck. I take big leaps, almost stumbling over a rock and I catch up with Paul. I shrug my head, 'there,' I say. 'Behind the tree.'

We crouch behind it and I see the tip of Lisa's skirt from the corner of my eyes. She is looking around for us, but then one of her friends calls her and she gives up. Paul whistles. It was a close call.

Lisa is always sick. She missed school for a whole week last month and she often tells the teacher she is not well and the teacher sends her to lie down in the infirmary. I know she found the golden stars box that the nurse keeps in the cupboard in the infirmary room, because I saw them too while I was there last time, but I did not take any because it would be cheating. We have a good behaviour

board in the class and once a month the teacher counts the stars we have. If we have more than ten, we get a surprise bag. Last week, at counting day, Lisa had fifteen golden stars. It was impossible because I always know how many stars everybody has and she only had eight the day before. I did not tell the teacher, because I was afraid Lisa would tell a lie again.

The other day Lisa asked us to go to the girls' bathroom with her. Paul said no and she went and told the teacher that Paul had hit her in the face. The teacher warned Paul and gave him a whole lecture on respect and sharing, and caring, and that if he hit her again, she would send him to pre-school class for a whole morning. So when Lisa asked us again the next day, we just went. She pulled us into the corner and said: 'Pull your pants down.'

We did not want to do it because she was a girl, but she said if we didn't do it she would scream and tell everyone it was our idea. So we did, and she said she wanted to make love. Paul said it was impossible, because we were too young, and that anyway, he did not feel like it. The bell rang, and she ran off.

'Are you sure we lost her?' Paul says.

I sneak my head from behind the tree until I just see the tip of a yellow dress and I pull back.

'I think she is chatting with her friends,' I say.

The teacher was nearby and saw her looking at us, signing for us to come and play. I look at my watch; it was five minutes before the break end.

'We're good,' I say. For now, I told myself. We're good.

'Am I pretty?' you said. 'Am I pretty in this dress?'

'Yes mother, this dress is nice, it suits your eyes.'

It was a long-sleeved dress, emerald-green, made of satin or something of the sort, with embroideries at the tip of the sleeves and lace on the collar. It was the dress you wore when you went dancing with father a few years back. Now you are too old for it, but still, it is a nice dress.

I did not immediately understand the feeling that I experienced when I learned about your illness. Only later did I recognise that I was afraid. Yesterday morning, I thought I lost you. You are punctual and every day you are awake by six whistling to the birds on the porch outside or rocking in the chair by the window facing the courtyard. On a clear day, you can see all the way up the mountain and you like to open the window and breathe in the fresh air: the breeze coming from the east carries the smell of the flowers near the lake, the lilies and the fish smelling water. But when I woke up, I did not find you. It was late, the sun was already high, and I ran to your room. I found you in the bed with the sheet pulled up to your chin and your eyes; were closed and I feared—not for long because I saw your eyes twitching, but enough. I stayed there looking at you wondering what you were seeing. Night brings strange ghosts and I never know what I will find when you open your eyes; sometimes there is hate, or confusion, I have even seen pity. Now, you were calling father again and I patted your wrinkled cheek. You opened your eyes.

‘Frankie, close the window, a storm is on its way.’

‘Yes darling,’ I said as if I was my father because I did not want to upset you.

You looked at me and smiled. You had make-up on, and jewellery. Every night before going to sleep you bath, brush your hair neatly, put on a clean night dress and do your face, just in case you say. Just in case.

When I look at you being so calm because you think I am father, I tell myself that perhaps forgetting is not such a bad fate. For Annabelle and me, it is different because nothing escapes us, especially her, you know how she is. She can recall conversation in details: she analyses, scrutinizes, did the person look up or down when she said this? Or maybe it was away? Does it mean she hates me?

If there’s one thing I thought you would have been able to see, it is the fact that she looks so much like you. The high cheek-bones, the dark hair, the pride. It is just like you. When she was a little girl she used to follow you everywhere scraping her knees on the rough carpet while sucking at the bottom of your silk night gown. Eventually you cut off a piece for her. I came across the gown the other day while I was sorting boxes; I was taking all the clothes out and scattering them around on the carpet to decide on what to keep and what to throw away. You see this is what I must do, decide on these matters because there is not so much time left, and it will be easier for me if I do all these things now. That is what the doctor told me anyway, he said, do prepare. It was Annabelle’s favourite game as a child to

unpack all the cupboards and spread the clothes everywhere in the house and I forgot about the clothes on the floor because the phone rang, and you found them. You folded everything neatly, put it away in the cupboard and pushed a little box in front of the bottom draw like you used to. I removed it, but then you put it back again.

She was lonely as a child, but unlike me, for her it was not a choice. I enjoyed being alone, I could spend my days collecting bugs, worms, flies, spiders, grass snakes, grasshoppers, once I even caught a bee and I trapped them all together in a small box to see who would survive. Sometimes, I was surprised.

And I played in the woods, trying to find a row of ants walking like little soldiers, and I would squash one, watch the line veer off. Like little soldiers. Sometimes the ants came back. Was it to feed on the dead ant? I don't know, but I have seen it happen a few times.

I was too old for Annabelle, our age difference always set us apart and she was clumsy at making friends, she had too much of a wild soul. Like when we went up North to the beach during the summer holiday. We went each year. Even when the weather was uncertain you and father lay on your beach towels under the grey sky and I hunted the crabs patrolling the sea shore. Annabelle strolled around the beach, trying to prevent the waves from touching her feet, running towards and away from the water as if she was scared of it, but at the same time could not get enough. A boy came up to her, he was about her age, maybe older, seven or something, I was already seventeen at the time, and he kicked the water with his foot; it made a big splash and wet her face. The boy laughed, gave a small smile, and waited for her response. He jumped on her back; he was just playing, he was a boy after all and this was a game, but she ran away. You saw everything and you said: 'Go and play Annabelle, see, this boy wants to play with you.'

The boy waited with his head bowed down because he had not wanted to hurt her, he waved at her, but she turned away from him and hid until he left. You were sad; her loneliness broke your heart. It's hard for a mother to see her child fail.

It was there that I saw the sea for the first time, and it was just like a first kiss, or the first time I fell in love: it was as beautiful and painful, the vastness, the power, the sudden peace and yet the threat, all of this stirred an amalgam of emotions difficult to take in all at once. Sometimes during the night the sea was so loud it was as if a plane was flying above us. I did not want to leave this place. Every year I waited with great excitement and each

time it was a real spiritual experience and I wondered if it was the same for the people who lived there or if the proximity of it and the fact of its evidence somehow numbed the feeling.

You would always bring your sheets, even if we slept in a hotel. Father said it was ridiculous.

‘We don’t know if they washed the sheets properly,’ you said. ‘I don’t want to sleep in someone else’s sweat.’ And you cleaned the toilet too.

‘There is a maid,’ father said. ‘Are you also afraid to take a shit in a dirty toilet?’

But it did not matter. It was a small price to pay to have peace. When I think of it now, I wonder how responsible you are for Annabelle’s fear of people, and intimacy: you barely tolerated all these little things yourself: an eyelash on your pillowcase, a ring of sweat under an arm while someone embraced you—you too refused this violation of your self.

There was a day when Annabelle ran away from home. It was because of what happened with Blackie: I never rode the horses, I was too scared, but she often did, without a saddle even, just holding onto their mane. That day, she went into the barn and saw the tip of something black concealed behind a bundle of hay and she thought it was Shane, the Terrier we had at the time. But it was not Shane that was crouched there, it was a foal. She ran into the house to tell father about it and he said: ‘Yes, I was expecting it to come any day now.’

‘You knew?’ she said. ‘You knew Blackie was pregnant? And you let me ride her? I took her to the woods yesterday, when she did not want to move forward, I kicked her flank. How could you let me do this?’

‘Annabelle,’ he said, ‘these are farm horses. They can take worse than this.’

She ran away. She took her bicycle and disappeared, but you and father did not go looking for her. You said she would come back.

‘When she gets tired and hungry, she will come back.’ You were right.

It has always been strange and disconcerting this distance she kept from us. She has never kissed, never held us in her arms. She is afraid, and I fear what it would do to her if you were to die before she has the courage to hold you in her arms, to cover you with kisses, to touch you. You know, she once asked me if I thought you ever had a lover. I was angry with her. But there was the picture I found while I was searching for an invoice: a man, tall, a boyish look, the sun-kissed skin of someone who spends his days outside. I thought perhaps it was grandfather when he was younger. Or even father, but now I don’t know. I never showed it to her. I left it for you on the table one morning and waited for your reaction.

‘Who is this?’ you said. ‘Who is this?’

‘I don’t know mother, you tell me.’

You looked at it for a while before saying: ‘Who are you anyway?’

I gave up because either you did not remember or you would not tell me. But you know, mother, I would not blame you. If this was true, I would not blame you.

I don’t like girls. Really. I know adults fancy thinking that in some way this is a way of hiding our true feelings. But I really don’t like them. Firstly, they always want to kiss. Most of them anyway and if we don’t want it, they laugh. Take Lisa for example. She pretended to like Martin. She said: ‘Kiss me like in the movies’. But Martin said no. She did not want to speak to him afterwards and she spent her days giggling with her friends making fun of him. I should have warned him about her. Lisa took him to a corner and said: ‘Are you a virgin?’

Martin thought for a while and he said no because he was Taurus. Lisa laughed with her whole group of friends even though I am convinced that most of them did not have a clue and looked it up on the internet as soon as they got home. Martin laughed because he thought what he had said must have been funny. I knew what it meant because Paul told me. He did not laugh afterwards. I hate girls.

Mother says that when a girl is cruel it is because she is jealous. I thought about it for a while. Maybe it is true. Lisa likes Martin. In class she took scissors and carved a big M on her arm until it bled. She has lots of marks on her arm. She does this often. She said the marks are like tattoos and that it does not hurt after a while. I told mother about it and she said it is because she is sad. I said that when I am sad I don’t feel like doing this. She said: ‘I know, but it is different. She is very very sad my angel. It’s complicated.’

I am very very sad since father has gone. I tried to mark my skin too with the scissors but it hurt so much that I stopped before it even bled. I don’t know how Lisa does it. Maybe she is sadder than me. But I find it hard to believe.

Claire used to say our work had similar tasks. She said that like her, I felt the need to take care of something. To be responsible. It was not entirely true I said, because nature does not need humans. It is a human ambition, an affliction even, to impose our ways, to turn things into something else, a fancy. Lawns are carefully controlled. Flower and tree grow where they are not supposed to. There are new varieties, new colours. In reality most things are better off without us, but we cannot let this be true because what would it make us?

She said we were both in the business of aesthetics: the art of appearances. Claire's hobby (or it was more a kind of selfish obsession) was to take a picture of her client before and after the trim. Often, they would say: 'It is me, yet it does not look like me.'

I found it was an extremely sensual experience to have my hair cut by her. I was always uneasy about the fact that I had to share it with others.

'Don't do this,' she said.

But I could not help feeling a pinch of jealousy every time I paged through the album. All of them had in some way experienced her touch, had her standing close, maybe they smelled her breath or felt the pressure of her breasts as she moved around them.

'Please don't be ridiculous,' she said.

For her I think the album was a kind of self-flattering tool.

'Look, you see, don't you think this woman is much more beautiful like this? So much more refined. I did this you know. I made her look this way.'

At some stage, I was convinced she was pregnant. All the signs were there, but one day it stopped. I did not ask her about it because I did not really want to know. I am too selfish for children, and I am uncomfortable around them. For one, I can never tell how old they are. Claire would always ask me pointing at a child in the street: 'This girl over there, how old is she? Six?' But she would be ten. 'You're really bad at this.'

She once asked me to look after her friend's children, a daughter of about eight and a younger boy: 'We won't be long.' When they came back the daughter told the mother she had seen me naked. Naked. Some words are just too heavy. In truth, I was changing in my room and the girl had come in without warning. But I was never asked to look after the children again.

The relationship between Claire and me tangoed between extremes. Sometimes our obsession for each other was irrational; at other times, we gave each other a taste of bitter indifference. When she was withdrawn, I desperately wanted to draw her back to me; I would start coming home early, I went to her work. 'Leave me alone,' she would say, 'I need some space.' But there was always the trace of a smile on her face because she took pleasure in seeing me so hopelessly trying to get her attention.

And when she was clingy she would stare at me intensely, searching my face for some kind of clue, assessing the legitimacy of my feelings. She would be more aware, alert to all the little things: if I looked away, the lack of compulsiveness in my touch, the plain kisses. Sometimes we passed a woman on the street and she would say: 'It must be strange to have sex with someone you barely know, stiff, with a struggle to find a common place, a tender move, and the wrong pace. Is she beautiful?'

She would want to know if I would have sex with her. I find it strange this constant and almost depraved curiosity that women have.

I remember one woman in particular: she had wide shoulders, a strong back; I wondered how it would feel to have sex with such a bulky body. I had the vision of her body over mine; I was just interested in the idea, in the *practicality* of it. She was not unattractive, striking green eyes and there was a sort of vulnerability about her, a defencelessness carried in a body that suggested the exact opposite. Claire was small, a tiny waist so easily surrounded by my hands. In bed, she was docile, sometimes I wished she was more effusive so as to take away the feeling of shame and guilt invading me every time she lay so still under me. But it was also a complete abandonment of herself, a kind of trust. Claire caught me staring at the woman: 'Would you have sex with *her*?' she said.

I did not reply. 'Don't be like this,' was all I said.

It was the day she asked me, 'Are you happy? Are you *really* happy here?' that I knew something was wrong. She had lived in the town all her life, and this was really about her; she was asking herself whether she fitted in. I am not one with strong attachments to places. But I like it here, the town is pleasant with its lively main road and its old music stores selling and collecting LPs, the curio shops, the pubs, and the quaint coffee shops—one is in fact also an antique dealer where you can buy all that is inside, even the table you are eating on.

‘Buy something,’ she said while we were having dinner there one night, ‘it will make you remember tonight.’

I picked an old rusted tin box because everything else was too expensive, but we never used it because the next day, some weevils appeared from it and I threw it away. She was distraught by it because for her it was as if it was the memory itself I had thrown away. She took things too seriously.

And there is a river, a dam where people swim when it is really hot, music festivals in the streets. But all of this mattered more to her than to me. It was not long after this she told me she was leaving. She went overseas somewhere in Africa on a cooperation mission. I saw her briefly when she came back; I found she had changed, she had put on a little bit of weight, her skin had gone darker, but there was something else, as if she had been freed of something. She stayed for a year, but then she left again. She realised that after all, she never really wanted to be here, that she belonged somewhere else.

Paul said I can’t speak to Martin anymore. He saw me throwing a ball with him the other day on the way back to school and he said, ‘Who’s your best friend?’ I told him he was, but in truth, I liked Martin too. He asked me to choose and I said I was going to think about it. I told mother and she said I didn’t have to do this because I could play with who I wanted to so I phoned Paul, I told him this and he hung up on me. When I got to school Paul was waiting for me by the gate as usual, but Martin was with him, and Charles. When I came closer, they did not say anything, they acted as if I was not there. I looked at Charles and he almost spoke to me, but I saw Paul shrugging his head and then, Charles looked away. I was alone for the whole morning break and when afternoon came, I did not want to go outside, but the teacher said I must because no one was allowed inside at break time. So I went out, Paul signed to me inviting me to play ‘catch’. I lit up and ran towards him, my heart throbbing with excitement. I took my place on the field and someone blew a whistle. A boy from an older class came to the front line. He threw the ball as hard as he could in my direction. I caught the ball and I saw that Paul was angry. Later he got me back and bruised my thigh. They followed me all the

way home, sometimes whispering my name, or laughing and I tried not to listen, but I heard everything.

When I tell mother about it, her face flushes red. She wants to drive to Paul's house. I beg her not to because things will get worse if she does.

'Fine,' she says. 'But I'll speak to your teacher.'

Paul only lives three streets from me. His mother is not as pretty as my mother and her hair is blonde. One day she dyed it brown. Chestnut, to be precise because I saw the box. She layered the thick brown paste on her head as if icing a cake and the whole house smelled funny and then she walked around with a plastic grocery bag on her head. And Paul's house is very small; he has to share a room with his brother. His brother's name is Sam, he is ten years old. We often play tricks on Sam and once we put glue all over the toilet bowl and waited for Sam to go to the bathroom because he goes all the time. His mother says he has a bladder of a mouse. Only it was not Sam who went, but his Dad. He often gets angry with Paul. Most of the time, it's for nothing except for this time. I know he must have given him a strong hiding.

I wonder if he'll scold him if he hears what Paul has done to me, but I doubt it. I think he might just pat him on the back. He does not really like me, his father. I once heard him say that I am a weak link, but I did not cry. I'll tell father about it. When he comes back, I'll tell him.

I always make a fuss over Sunday lunch. I set the table nicely by placing flowers in the middle, I use the silver cutlery, fold the napkins in neat little fans that I insert in the fork's teeth. I know you are not really aware of all of this—most of the time, it is a struggle to even make you sit at the table—but I try. At least, I try. For the sake of it. And my own sake too. There is a kind of sanity, I find, in performing these rituals.

Today I roasted vegetables with basil and parsley that I have picked in the garden and I baked olive bread and it smells lovely in the house. You don't eat meat. It happened when

you were a young girl: you used to play hide and seek with your sister and you hid in a hay container at the back of the field, crouching on your knees at the bottom, covering yourself with hay and keeping still. Your sister looked everywhere, but could not find you. She grew tired of the game and went to play outside while you waited patiently, but it got hot and when you tried to lift the lid, you found yourself trapped. You cried and screamed, clawed at the inside, but no one heard you. It was already dusk when you were freed. All afternoon, your father had been busy in the slaughter house and all this time, you heard the lambs squeal. You smelled the blood too, like the taste of metal, a coin in your mouth. The next day you left the fold gate open and chased the sheep away, but they came back. They were hungry.

We were never allowed to eat meat in front of you because you could not even bear the smell, but once, father brought home a rabbit. It was a whole rabbit, hairless but not deboned—you could see the shape of its small chest and its athletic thighs folded on top of each other as if striking a pose. Its head was cut off.

‘What’s this?’ you said.

The meat was deep red, silky, it almost shined. He inserted a knife, made three neat incisions at the top; the movement was effortless, the flesh sliced easily.

‘It’s fresh,’ he said.

He tipped some oil, rubbed it into the rabbit with his fingers and inserted a few rosemary twigs into the meat. You covered your mouth with your hand.

‘Son,’ he told me, ‘never forget that it’s part of nature to feast on each other.’

I ran to my room and cried; I did not want to have to choose between him and you.

I place the plate in front of you and you prick the vegetables with the tip of your fork and I hide a smile because the napkin is still stuck between the fork’s teeth. I remove it gently. I wait for you to bring the food to your mouth, but you don’t. You want something to drink. ‘Gin,’ you say. You have always refused to drink wine. You find there is something sinister about looking at someone with blackened lips. It is a stain you said, the irrefutable proof of an immorality committed. You once told me how you remembered the look of your mother when she had a few glasses of wine and came to kiss you good night: she was no alcoholic or anything of the sort, but her breath, the red marks on her teeth, all of this made her look hostile and corrupted in some way.

I pour you a glass and put a few ice cubes to dilute the alcohol. The cubes sink into your glass, then resurface, and I wonder if it is like this, if what has sunk will always resurface. Is it possible that you will remember me again?

‘Try to eat something,’ I say.

But you stubbornly push the plate away. I don’t feel like a struggle today. You’ll eat when you’re hungry. I finish my food while you lay your head on the kitchen table. Within minutes your breathing slows to a steady pace and you fall asleep. You toss and turn your head on the hard wood and your eyes are twitching again. What are you seeing, mother? Am I in any of your dreams? You were sad today and you did not tell me why. But you are sad often. You were sad last month when the façade of the Flamingo Hotel fell to the ground. I think a lot of people were sad too. The hotel held dancing evenings, cabaret shows and the bar was the only one of its kind where men smoked cigarettes and sipped whiskey while they watched the women warm up on cocktails. And it was not a bar, but a hotel with rooms only a few steps away.

But six months ago it was sold, the new owner said the façade would be kept, an attempt at preserving the heritage, but the rest would be demolished. The builders took the walls down, and ripped up the floors, broke all the windows. They gutted the building until there was nothing left, only the façade standing on its own. It was a strange sight, like a face stripped off a head, and the façade collapsed; it was too weak to stand on its own. People said it was a shame. They had written, ‘I love Nancy’ on it and then: ‘Nancy is a bitch.’ Had you written something on it too? They had leaned against its wall to rest after a walk, waited for their dog to pee, or because they had too much to drink, made too many mistakes, the weight of too much guilt. It had always been there, and suddenly it wasn’t and it felt strange for everyone to look at the empty space, as if a tank had fired at the town.

You spoke often of this hotel saying that you and father used to go there every weekend for dancing and you wore the green dress, the one you like so much, it was father’s favourite too. I have this memory of you: red lipstick, the smell of sweet talc in your neck (lily was the scent) and red shoes, like Dorothea in the wizard of Oz. You tapped them together and winked at me: ‘Tonight, I am going away.’ Away: the word burned me.

It is strange to look at you now, so weak and so pale. It all started with a headache. We thought it was a bad cold and we gave you pain killers, told you to stay in bed. Then you

were treated for an ear infection. And sinusitis. You slept for days, the pain, you said, was not going away, but still you did not complain. We took you to the doctor and he feared what could have so easily escaped him, and he booked you for a scan. It was a brain tumour. As big as a fist. He said he could not remove it, not even try; it was in a bad place. In a bad place.

And just like this, you were doomed. It is true what is said, a wind can suddenly change. Sometimes fate happens slowly, the way a can rusts over years, wearing out, slowly becoming less and less of itself. Or it comes like rubbish brought by a bad sea. And now, you are dying, and you have started to forget things because the tumour is expanding. You have forgotten me, and Annabelle, and father's death. 'You might not recognise her,' the doctor said, 'the tumour will affect her and what she is.'

It is going to take you away, he said. Away.

I wet my bed and I do not want my mother to find out. I am almost twelve; it is ridiculous. The sheets are wet and cold and it is dark outside. On the chair next to me is the towel I used the day before when I came out of the bath. I can't reach it with my hands, but it is only a few steps away. I have to do this I tell myself. I have too. Outside, I hear the wind beating against the window. I pull the blanket away and sit up, but then lay back down again. I can't. I can. I have to do this. The wet sheets are starting to make my skin itchy. I get up. It takes me two steps to get to the chair, I grab the towel. It takes me three steps to get back because I knock the tip of my toe on something on the floor and then I am in my bed again. I feel a pulse in my toe. I rub it vigorously with my hand but it is not bleeding. I wrap myself in the towel so that no part of my body touches the wet sheets.

In the morning she comes into my room, draws the sheets and sees me wrapped up in the towel. She must smell it too, because I do.

'Oh my angel,' she says.

Then, she cries. I know why. At school, there is a girl still using a dummy to sleep. She wets her sheets almost every night. I know this because every year we have a three-day school camp and I saw the teacher changing the sheets. Her

mother always comes to school and walks her to the front door waiting there with her until the bell rings. We call her baby Lucy. Now mother probably thinks I am like this too and maybe she will insist on walking me all the way to the class door. And Paul will make fun of me.

I want to tell her that I am not baby Lucy. Last year, I punched someone right in the face. I am not afraid of spiders. In fact, I hold them in my hand and sometimes I even pull their legs off. I am almost as tall as the tallest in my class. I sometimes say fuck you, bitch, whore, mother fucker. I have seen a naked woman before. It was in a magazine Paul brought to school and we hid behind a wall at break and touched ourselves. I got an erection and Paul said his father told him that this happens when you are a man. I am a man. I want to tell her all of this as she takes the wet sheets away.

‘Take a bath,’ she says. ‘Hurry,’ ‘you’ll be late for school.’

I do it, because she looks so sad, but I will not let her walk me all the way to the school door. Like baby Lucy.

Annabelle is coming today. You see, on the shelf, in the living room, the little girl in the picture sitting by a pool with floaters around her arms, a strange look on her face as if the world has been hostile to her. It is her, mother, it is your daughter. What did she fear? I don’t know. Maybe it was the vastness of the pool, the cold water on her warm skin or the swim itself. Every Saturday morning, you took her for swimming lessons. How old was I then? Sixteen? Maybe older. And Annabelle, she was six I think. Or seven? Or younger. You know I am not good with these things. You came back home one day with a little bundle in your arms, Annabelle wrapped in a blue towel. She went under you said, not for long, but long enough. A man fished her out of the water; she had taken quite a gulp. Never again will they see your daughter you said.

I hear knocks at the door, it is Annabelle. Be nice. She flings a bag onto the table and goes straight to you. You are sitting on the rocking chair by the window, still in your night dress.

‘You look so pale,’ she says.

Yes, what did she expect?

‘And thin. Is she eating? Are you feeding her? What about this?’ she says pointing at the nightdress.

She feels guilty, I know, because she is not here so she is going to come down on me.

‘She eats. She sleeps. She talks. She is sick, what did you expect?’

‘Not this.’

You are staring at us and Annabelle speaks to you softly, ‘It’s me,’ she says.

You keep smiling at her.

‘Do you want a blanket? Let me bring you something warm, you must be so cold in this.’

She gives me a hard look. She never calls you mother. She says it upsets you because then you try too hard to remember; but you can’t, and it sends you into fits. I said that we must keep on trying. ‘No,’ she said, ‘we must just be there for her.’ As if she was the righteous one.

She is too proud. Wild, and proud. Shame on her. ‘Shame on you!’ That is what the boy that used to come to our house told her when he decided to never come back. Never come back. You know the boy, he was about the same age, eight or nine, and he sometimes came to our house. They fought like dogs wanting to establish their dominance, though there was no real intention of hurting each other, or at least that is what we thought. But one day she told him, ‘You don’t have to contain yourself just because I’m a girl.’

He wasn’t holding back, he just didn’t want to hurt her, and she punched him. Right in the face; blood trickled from his nose onto the white snow, like cherry syrup on a snow cone. She watched it with a strange fascination. You came and wiped the boy’s nose while Annabelle stood there, staring at the blood, then at the boy. The consequence of her action was clear, apparent, and I think that is what distressed her the most. It was not like when one tries to explain to a child that what he or she had said has upset someone else. There was blood. She knew she had hurt him. But she was ashamed. When you asked her to apologise she became infuriated and when you picked her up she clawed at you, kicked and bit your arm. You could not reach out to her so you locked her in her room. She cried the whole evening, loud sobs, heart-breaking ones; it was a lot of rage, and a lot of humiliation flowing out from her.

She has even slapped you once. You were supposed to take her to the fair, but you did not feel well. The whole day she waited, going around the living room like a lion in a cage, and when you said you would not go she screamed at you, threw books, chairs, pillows on the floor and the whole room was in a mess, 'Enough,' you said and you grabbed her by her bare arm and she slapped you. How old was she then? Seven? You lifted her and threw her onto her bed, closed the door behind you. She wee'd all over the carpet like a tom-cat marking his territory. It was her little revenge. But then she hammered at the door wanting to come out because she could not bear the sharp smell.

But of course the wild soul concealed something else: a scared little girl. You were always so strong with her, mother. She was your only little girl and you moulded her in the way you wanted her to be. I think with me it was different because I was a boy and you did not try to control me because you would not know how. You were at a loss with me: when you came into my room to wake me up and found me with a full erection, you were disarmed. But with her it was different. I remember she wanted a cat for so long, but you would not let her. I never understood why you so firmly refused—you, who liked animals so much. But you wanted to dominate her and I think it was because you were afraid of your own daughter. It is true that women tend to be jealous creatures and strong rivals. And so there were often times where Annabelle did not know who she was and it came out as strong fits and the more she kicked and screamed, the more you wanted to control her.

You often walked naked in front of us. You said you wanted us to see the way things were. For me it helped me resolve the mysteries of women, but for her it was different. She saw what she was bound to become and it scared the little girl within her to see you showing off your breasts and the pink nipples and the rough hair as if it was nothing. And when she started having breasts herself she walked with her shoulders bent forward, hunching like an old woman.

I think you made her lose herself. I can see her standing in front of the wall of her apartment, an empty room around her; she could not furnish it with anything for days, and I said just go to the shop and buy what you fancy, but she didn't know how. It was a battle in her mind, maybe she heard your voice, *not this one Annabelle it won't match with the desk, and this one is just too ugly, don't you have any taste?* You should have let her paste things

onto the walls and wear an ugly dress if that is what she wanted. But you had to control everything she did. Now things are escaping you.

Once she set a table with crosses, little statues of Mary and pictures of the Saints as if it was some kind of altar, fixing a thread of little lights, she used the Christmas lights, onto the cloth and spent the whole evening bent on her knees repeating the Our Father. But the lights were too heavy for the sticky tape and eventually they fell off dragging the whole cloth to the floor, the statues broke, and the pictures got wet from the holy water. She went into a fit, cursing and throwing everything away. Later, she did not want to go to church anymore, but you said she had to. She did the same when she learned about your tumour; she screamed and she cursed, and then she did not want to see you. She did not understand, and she was afraid.

And now I am the one there for you. I am the one who removes the used tissues from the sleeve of your nightdress, help you change into clean clothes when you have soiled yourself. Once, you stood up from the rocking chair and your pants fell down at your knees because you are so thin. You stood there completely helpless and I wish I had not seen this, you know. I am the one receiving all the hatred and frustration when you can't remember. I wipe your tears or the dry soup from the corner of your mouth. Annabelle could never do this, she is too afraid of this kind of intimacy.

She has brought you a rose and you hold it in your hand as if it is some kind of fragile animal. The rose is pink and its petals are so silky that they are glowing as if they are wet. You have always find roses sophisticated. She combs your hair and traps the rose behind your ear. She tells you that the girl from the post office is getting married and you listen to her, you always do. *At weddings, people always try to steal everything*, you say. You decorated the table with fish bowls at your reception; the guests took everything: the bowls and the fish too.

'The girl wants butterflies,' Annabelle says. 'She has told everyone that after the ceremony they'll free butterflies.'

'It's stupid,' I say. 'Brides are stubborn: they want roses without thorns, lilies without pollen, allergy-free daisies. Don't want to itch, don't want to stain. A foretaste of the life-long commitment. Better choose well: life is a big gardening challenge. Plant the groom,

water the groom, trim the groom. Water too much, and he'll rot; don't water enough and he'll dry out.'

This is something I have learned too well at the nursery. And it's the season now; brides will come to me like nervous little birds paging frantically through catalogues.

You have a hard look on your face.

Leave me, you say. Go away.

I take Annabelle by the sleeve and try to walk her outside of the room. She wants to stay, but I insist. In the window a fly is caught in the curtain, desperately fighting with the weight of the linen.

I'm scared, you say, so very scared.

It is Sunday and it is time for church. I hate going to church because it stinks. When people sing the chants I can smell their breath, but mother said I must go to church or I will make Jesus sad. I don't want to make him sad, but I hate church. If I keep quiet and still, she gives me a dollar and she said I should save it to buy something really nice. I know what I want. I want the new water machine-gun they received at the shop: extra large water tank, high air pressure, it shoots water like bullets. And I would like for Paul to speak to me again. Perhaps if I get the gun, he will change his mind.

The other day mother was angry because I chewed gum during the service. I thought it would help me because then I would smell the chewing gum and not the people, but mother said I couldn't chew gum in church. I said: 'Why? Is it going to make Jesus angry?' She said it is impolite to chew gum in the house of God. So I promised her not to stick the gum anywhere in the house of God once I'm finished, but still, she said no. So I brought a lozenge because I thought it was more discreet, but she smelled it and scolded me at home and I did not get my dollar.

Paul's mother doesn't force him to go to church. I told mother about it and she said: 'What other people do with their children is their business: you, you go to church.' Fine.

‘Brush your teeth and get ready.’

I listen. I want my dollar. And I want to make her happy. She is pretty today. She is wearing a floral dress and a scarf. She has put on lipstick. And perfume. I’ll try to stick very close to her when people start to sing. She must be dressing up like this for Jesus. Because the church is his house and it is just like when we go visit people, she always wants me to be dressed nicely.

It has been raining for the whole morning and the radio predicted we would have a rainy summer. Most people are complaining, but I think rain is good. The windows of the house are clear and shiny, the rain sleeked them nicely, and the grass has turned a darker green, leaves are glowing in the trees and there is a crispness to the air that is refreshing.

At least we have not had thunder-storms, not yet anyway. But you know, you should not be afraid of storms so much, heat waves are just as bad. Do you remember the hot summer we had a few years back? A summer in hell, people said. Careless sunbathers lay under the sun for too long and ended up at the hospital with heat-stroke. It was worse for the elderly of course because it was too hot for their fragile hearts. Even one of our neighbours did not make it: collapsing right in the middle of a strawberry field in the midst of picking; the effort was too much and his heart just stopped. This is when you really start reflecting on death and being truly afraid of it. It was long before your illness, or was it already there? You became overly superstitious; you moved the bed because you had read somewhere it should not face a mountain. And there were times when you would get panic attacks, you would breathe with difficulty or you became dizzy and you thought you were having a heart-attack or a stroke. Perhaps the cancer was already at work then, or all this fear fed it well.

When you learned you were sick I guessed I was expecting that all of this would get worse, that you would get more of these panic attacks and that you would be afraid all of the time, and perhaps angry too. I certainly was. But it didn’t happen like this because suddenly the threat was real, and it was true that you were dying.

I researched the cancer night and day, trying to make sense of it, and I came across a thousand words I could not pronounce and every time I thought, this cannot be, and it was as if I was looking at someone else from above to whom this was happening. And I was angry. First, I was angry at you because there was a part of me that thought that it was your fault,

that you harboured so much resentment and that it had turned your blood to poison. And I was distant too because when something so terrible happens it's hard to really make sense out of it and realise that this is what is really happening. Denial is a form of protection I guess, but it was something more than denial or disbelief. It was a kind of unconsciousness.

And they did not want to commit themselves, the specialists, to any opinion on how long you had to live, in case it was less, or more; they did not want to take any hope away, or give too much of it.

I'm so very scared, you said. I guess I should have held your hand and said that everything was going to be fine. But it was not true. It is just going to get worse. The doctor gave me a bag full of pills and a bunch of brochures on how to accompany you on this journey.

The journey.

University of Cape Town

PART TWO

Every day you sit by the window as if you are expecting something—or perhaps, it is someone. Are you waiting for father to pull into the drive-way, to walk the little cobblestone path and throw his boots onto the door-mat like he used to do? You would get up, pick up the boots and line them side by side in front of the door saying: *Frankie I'm not asking for the moon here*. And as usual father would sigh and say: 'How was your day? Mine was long. Thanks for asking' and press a kiss on your forehead.

I want to hear the bells, you say. You have put on your blue rayon gown, the dress seems too silky and too smooth on you wrinkled skin.

I want to hear the bells.

I come to you and touch your forearm, the hair stands upright, are you afraid?

'It is not Sunday,' I say.

You leave the room and sit by the kitchen table. Have you given up on the idea or did you believe me when I said it was not possible? You rarely listen to me. Something shatters on the floor and I run to you. At your feet there is a broken plate: *It was too silent*, you say. *Too silent*.

You could never tolerate silences very well, always needed something to be happening around you. A few years back, it was easy. There were us, me in my teenage-years hating the world, hating you, and Annabelle, much younger, always hissing and screaming. *I want to hear the bell*. In your look there is something hard, hatred perhaps, yes, hatred. At this moment, you hate me, and I wonder if perhaps I should hate you too.

You never liked to be alone. When you were a little girl you shared a bed with your sister and the whole night the two of you held hands. You were angry with her when your father committed suicide because she did not hate your mother like you did; she did not blame her for it. You did not speak to her for years, and when she died in a car accident, it was too late. You refused to go back to the valley for the funeral. You were too afraid of going back there, too many memories. You never spoke about her, only once you showed me a picture: she was beautiful, a smooth skin, long dark hair falling over her shoulders and a warm smile. She looked a lot like you, and Annabelle. In fact the way you sometimes brush Annabelle's cheek and this deep and long look you give her makes me wonder who you are

really seeing. It would have done her good to know her aunt and perhaps even to have an ally against you.

You never talk about the farm and it's strange for me to know so little about it. You have spoke often of the long yellow fields and the strong wind that sometimes blew in the valley—it has a name, but I have forgotten. You said that at times the wind blew so hard that it flattened the hay and it was as if a comb had passed through the field and brushed it, all to one side. You did not have neighbours; your friend Sophia lived on the next farm and you had to ride your bicycle to get there. There were no mountains or forest, but there was a covered bridge: the longest in the country. And the two of you raced your bicycle through it, the last to arrive paid for the ice-cream.

It must have been silent in the valley, is that why you cannot endure it? Does it remind you too much of your life there? You are still waiting for me to take you somewhere where you can hear the bell. You are being difficult and I resent you for it, but it seems unfair to be too harsh with you. You are a dying woman.

I need space away from you so I sit outside on the veranda. The air smells of damp grass, pollen and dirt lifted by the rain. It is compelling, yet unbearable at the same time. I stay there for a while, allowing myself to become intoxicated by it. There are daisies in the garden, though I never planted daisies. At the nursery, people often ask me about this: they think that by digging round holes it will prevent roots from spreading, invading other plants, but it does not work like this. Nature always finds a way. Like seeds. They can be dormant for years until they resurface again. Nothing is really root-bound.

And that is why I know that it is buried in you somewhere—me, Annabelle, father—everything that you were. Everything that you are. Look around you: everything speaks. The little desk in your room with key holes in each drawer, don't you remember how much you liked it? You bought it with father at an antique shop in a village nearby. He got it restored for you. You lined the bottom of the draws with silk paper, polished its surface with lemon oil. And on it, there is the blue tea pot Claire gave to you when she came back from Africa. I don't know why, but she wanted you to have it. She explained to you how they brewed the tea over there, over charcoal, and how they poured the hot liquid in small cups inclining the pot so that it formed a mousse.

‘The thicker the mousse the better,’ she said.

She made tea for you.

‘Drink,’ she said. ‘Celui là est sucré sucré comme l’amour.’ She had learned the words in French. This one is sweet sweet like love. She prepared three teas: the first bitter like death, the second one sweet like life, and the last one, the sweetest of all, like love.

‘How did you do it?’ I said.

‘What?’

‘How did you become someone else?’ because I found her changed.

‘You know,’ she said, ‘people are not afraid of storms over there, they praise it.’

You said she was escaping. I wanted to know why, but you wouldn’t tell me.

And next to it there is the old oil lamp I gave to you. I did not tell you, but I stole it. I am not proud of it, but I was young, the pressure of peers, it comes from a pub on main road. There are a lot of things you don’t know about me. You don’t know about the one evening when you came back late and found me sleeping like an angel. In truth, I had passed out. I had stolen the gin from your pantry and went to drink in the park. I drank and drank watching the sky, the clouds streaming past, the trees connecting above me and their branches meeting like hands. I was sick almost immediately.

When I go back inside, you are still waiting. You have shattered four more plates and the broken pieces lie at the bottom of your feet. *I want to hear the bell.* I come to you and take you by the arm; I want to take you out of the room because you are bare-footed and I don’t want you to hurt yourself. You don’t want to stand up, you are stubborn.

‘There is no mass today,’ I say.

You won’t move so I leave you here, with the broken pieces at your feet because it is not worth the fight, and I am tired.

There were a lot of people at church.

‘A lot of sad people asking for favours,’ mother said.

‘Can I ask something too?’ I said.

‘Of course my angel.’

So I went on my knees because that is the way to do it and I pressed my hands together and then I thought for a while because there were a lots of things I

wanted. I wanted for Paul to speak to me again because I had been very sad without him. It is not that I can't be alone, I like playing by myself, but it is just better when he is here. And then I also wanted the water-gun. Very much. Charles told me that he was going to buy it this week-end and I said to him that I already had it, which is a little lie, but it will be fine if I get it this week or maybe even today, can I get it today? And of course, most of all, I wish for my father to come back. My mother pulled me on my sleeve: 'Can we go now my angel because I need to stop at the shop on the way home.'

I was not ready yet because I really wanted all of this to become true and I thought I needed to stay on my knees for a little longer because surely if I stood up now it will be too soon.

'Come,' she said.

And she dragged me out and it was the first time I was not running out of the church and just before we got out of the door I said to Jesus that I promised I would be back and pray more, but meanwhile if he could just try. Just try.

There is a flower next to my bed. A rose. Pale pink like the skin of a new born. Is it for me? I take it with my hand, it does not smell much anymore, but it is pretty. One by one I tear the petals, he loves me, he loves me not, it is a silly game, but I feel like it. Soon, there are petals covering the floor as if there had been a wedding. I am walking in the courtyard of a church. I am barefoot and the grass is thick and smooth under the soles of my feet. I can hear the bells and their steady rhythm rocking me to peace. There is not much to find today: crumpled sheets, I think they are ceremony programs, cigarette butts and a button. The ground is perforated by women's heels as if there had been thousands of tiny little moles digging tunnels and I am almost expecting for one to pop out of the hole like this game at the fair.

It smells as if it is going to rain soon. Rain on a wedding day is lucky, apparently. I find nothing to keep but for a button. It is made out of wood, four holes and it is blue, it must have fallen off a man's jacket. Perhaps even the groom's? I will put it in my bowl along with all the other objects I have found. My favourite one is a drawing. I don't know why, but I have always liked it. As if it was a bottle sent from the sea. I imagined the wind had blown it

from far away, that it had travelled across the lands and oceans, just like when balloons are released it feels as though they are going all the way to the edge of the sky where the universe starts, just before it gets dark. Of course the truth is that most of them deflate before or are blown merely a few corners away, but it didn't matter. It didn't matter.

Someone is calling for me. Deep and strong, it is the voice of a man. He comes to me and brings me a plate of food. I am in a room. It is scarcely furnished: a bed-side table, a lamp, a wardrobe, a carpet at my feet. Nothing is really familiar. He wants me to eat, but I am not hungry.

I am looking through the window and I can see all the way across the courtyard at the edge of the wood. I narrow my eyes; I would like to see a deer, or a hedgehog, or a wolf, are there wolves in this wood? I know there is a silver birch with bark as smooth as paper where little kids write their name or play tic-tack-toe. It is right here behind the big pine tree, I can't see it, but I know it's there. The road starting just above me at the bottom of the stairs leads all the way into the wood, winding through ferns and high grass and thorns and yellow flowers that grow in between like little princesses behind bars and in the bushes bordering the road there are red berries, but they are not good to eat, they can make someone very sick, they are only good for the birds. It is funny this: the world is really not a safe place because there are things that can kill growing right here in the back-yard.

But sometimes it is enough just to have bad thoughts because that too can kill. Look at me now, too much sadness, too many regrets; that is what has caught up with me. And they are doing their deed quickly, poisoning my blood and my mind. It's like when you have put too much salt in a soup; there's nothing much you can do to make it better.

And so it is like this, and I am going only one way, and it is down, down, down the roller coaster, but I doubt there'll be wind on my skin or this feeling of euphoria, but who am I to tell? I'll know soon enough though, and if I can come back to tell you how it is, would you like to know?

From the bedroom you have a view from the mountain and when the window is open you can hear the woodpecker at work in the tree behind the house and I can imagine it is like a reminder of time passing, it is for me anyway. And at night your face is lit by the light coming through the window from the cross at the top of the mountain and when I look at you lying in this light I almost feel as if this was always meant to be, but it can't be true, can it?

And you keep looking at Claire's picture and I can see your eyes narrowing and your face wrinkling; you are trying hard, too hard to summon the memory, and I wish you would do the same for me, but I guess sometimes it is easier to remember the one we hated than the one we loved. It must be an uncanny feeling to have all these strangers around you, thieves who have broken into your life, terrorising you a little more every day. It must be as if you had somehow lost your way in someone else's life and you can't get out.

Lately you have been asking about Sophia, sweet Sophia, who taught me desire. I can still see her in her short camisole at the jazz festivals, with her hands held high praising the band we had come to watch that day, offering me the vision of her breasts and her hips swinging to the rhythm of the music. There were people everywhere, and as we entered the crowd I had the impression of crossing a circle of fire. We found ourselves at the front of the stage. Next to us stood a man that could not stop looking at her—a hungry look it was. Yes Sophia, your friend who I have investigated all my youth, trying to understand what women were made of. I picked the scarf she carelessly left on the couch and sniffed it like a dog, or I hid behind the bathroom door and watched her pee. I was fascinated by her and her poise, this confidence she carried like a piece of expensive jewellery. I suspect she always knew what I was doing and just allowed it.

But she was never good to you. And she was never good to us, but you never saw this. You held on to her because you never thought you were better than this, and her strength fooled you. She was free and nothing could prevent her from doing what she wanted not even you, especially you. In a way, it was as if she lived a life for you, and you kept yourself blind refusing to see the price you paid.

And now you want to see her more than anything else. I have heard you call her name in the night and when I came into the room I found you shaking and pearls of sweat covered your forehead. Why do you want to see her again?

Sophia, you said. Sophia. I need to see her. I want to see her.

You dreamed that you were talking to her, telling her something that was really important to you, but she would not allow you to talk. She just talked and talked, her mouth just would not stop and she was not saying anything, or at least you could not remember a word of it, just the image of her lips moving and this feeling inside you that you terribly wanted to say something to her. And then you cried like a child in my arms. But I am not going to allow this. I am not going to watch you cry for her. She deserves nothing.

I know that you have shared things that created a strong bond between the two of you. You both grew up on a farm and saw chickens continue to run after they had had their heads chopped off; and you nursed little lambs, or had piglets as pets while later their blood was washed from the floor in the slaughter house. And you saw a man die. You were picking flowers in the field behind Sophia's house to make little flower-crowns and there was a man working on the roof of her house fixing the tiles because there was a leak. When it rained the water dropped into the living room and her mother had enough of having to put buckets everywhere. You both watched the man work and you thought the man was brave because you were afraid of heights. Sophia would not even climb a ladder or jump from a rock into a lake. The whole afternoon the man worked hard, standing under the hot sun, and perhaps his hands had gotten wet from all the sweat, and he was tired, or dizzy, but he lost his balance and slipped and fell off the roof. You saw it happening: his body like a chunk of dough falling to the ground. And it was such a silly little accident everyone said. 'Why did he not tie himself to the roof?' 'Why was he working alone?'

The both of you ran away; you did not want to tell anyone that you had seen it. But the image kept animating the darkness behind your eyelids, you had bad dreams, and eventually you spoke about it.

You were little girls then, and it was long before your father died. And for a long time the two of you were inseparable. Even when you left the valley and came here it was not long after that she announced she was moving to the city to study nursing and there she was again, living only two hours way. It seems as if fate wanted to keep you together. And there was nothing, not even what you thought the two of you had, that prevented her from doing what she always wanted. And she hurt you. But still, you are asking for her like a silly girl who can't keep her hands away from the stove even if she knows that she will burn herself, eventually.

Mother says we're going to go to the airport today to watch the planes. It is a few hours from our house. We are going to have lunch there. I am so excited. Along the way we play the car game my father showed me. Yellow car= 5points. Blue car=3 points. White or Gray=1point. Black=0 Red=you're out. I start. I see two white cars (2), a blue car (3+2), another blue car (5+2) and then a red car which means I am out and it is my mother's turn. I have scored 7 points. My mother sees a yellow car (5points, she got lucky), a white one (1point) then a red. Bad luck. So far, I win. Ah. It's my turn again. I see a car. It is white (1), then another white (1) and a blue (3). I hold my breath. The car is like my father's car. I looked back but I can't see it anymore. I saw a man with a beard in it. Just like father. It was my father. Mother, father was here. But she has not seen it.

'My angel what is the score?'

I don't want to play anymore.

We get to the airport.

'Look at the plane my angel. Look how they lift from the ground.'

I don't look. I think about the blue car. I think about my father. I know the car very well because I chose it with him. When our old car broke father said it was time to buy a new one and he took me with him. He taught me the names of the cars. Toyota. Buick. Chrysler. Mazda. Polo.

'What is this son?'

'A Mazda'

'Well done son, well done.'

We bought a Toyota. Blue like the sky. And I watched him pull in the driveway every time he came back from work. 'Let's go for a drive,' I would say. 'I will drive.' Sometimes he allowed me to sit on his lap and steer the wheel. 'Like a pro,' he always said. I want to ask mother, but I know she did not see the car.

I miss father. Mother said it is because he had to work hard for us and that is why he went away.

'He is doing this for us you know. He'll be back soon.'

'How soon?'

'Soon.'

'But what kind of soon? Very soon or just a little bit soon.'

'Soon enough.'

'Did you see my angel, did you see the plane? Someday, I will take you in a plane and we will go far away. You will see.'

I don't want to go far way. I want to stay right here where father can find me.

'Planes are stupid,' I say.

She looks at me and narrows her eyes.

'We drove all the way. To make you happy. You must look at the planes. Are you hungry?'

We eat and after we watch more planes and after a little while I tell her that I'm tired. We drive home, the car makes me sleepy, but I keep my eyes wide open. I look for him. I see two blue Toyotas, but my father is in none of them.

I appear and disappear. I am here. I am not here. There is me and another me, but one is not real. I flick my eyes like a switch staring at my reflection in the window. A strange woman is looking back at me. I am almost sure it is me, but I have not looked at myself in a while and this woman is so old. Sophia always said: 'It was yesterday that we were twenty.' Yesterday. Where was I yesterday? I don't know.

It is a fair morning and I want to go for a walk, but the man does not allow me, he says I am too weak. He treats me like a child; I feel sorry for him. Does he really have nothing better to do than hang around me like an annoying fly? It's sad. The pretty girl came yesterday. Ah. It has come back to me now. Annabelle. That is what the other fool always calls her so it must be her name. Yes I am almost sure this is it, Annabelle. Hold on to it, I tell myself. Hold on. I take the bowl from the shelf by the window and turn it upside down. I hook the thought onto it. Only when things change do they become visible again: a book that fell, a portrait that tilted, a stain on the carpet, and that is what I do to remember. I move things around. When I see something strange, like a book in the bath or a magazine in the fridge, I know it's because it's suppose to remind me of something. Sometimes it works, sometimes I forget. Like the book on top of the lamp; I have no idea why I have put it there. This morning, when I woke up, I saw it. Then I knew I must have thought of something

and did this, but I just could not remember what. Think. Think. Think. But I could not remember. I am surprised I even remember the reason I do these things. Perhaps, there are some days I just think someone stupidly put a book on a lamp without remembering it was me. It's difficult to say, I'm not trustworthy. And there is the man. He constantly moves my things around. He does not seem to have a girlfriend or a wife, he must be terribly bored. He's a florist, he told me, and from time to time he brings me flowers, it's nice, but I wonder what he is expecting from me? No one gives flowers for nothing. Especially a man.

Annabelle, she is nice, I like her. I know she is not his girlfriend because of the way they look at each other. She looks vaguely familiar, maybe she reminds me of an actress or something. She is pretty: long hair, green eyes, when it rains, their colour changes. She never asks questions. She sits next to me, brushes my hair or reads a book. She does not call me mother like the other fool.

A bird is singing and it seems to be calling another bird, I can't see it, I guess it must be hiding in the tree. I would like someone to be calling for me. It is so silent in this house. Sometimes I can hear the ice crack in the freezer and it sounds like little knocks, as if there was someone trapped inside, something desperately wanting to be freed,

In the garden I see daisies, peonies, and a bush with flowers next to the house. And there is a sunflower. Every year, it grows back. It is surrounded by a little fence and I know that once I said to the man: 'Why did you put a fence around it? Are you afraid someone might steal it?' I laughed. He said that he had nothing to do with this.

'You did this mother. You planted the sunflower.'

I said: 'Me?' Then I looked at it. A sunflower. Yes, it's possible. To remind myself of something. I thought hard, but I could not remember. But I believe him. Yes. A sunflower. Like the book on the lamp. I know it is truth, it is me. But why? Stupid me. Why?

He said that I am selfish. That I don't pay attention to him. But I don't know you, I said, and I saw so much hardness in his eyes that I thought he could stab me with it. A look can kill. Yes. That is true. I think I must have screamed at him or talked harshly because he is staying away now. I did not mean to hurt him, I am almost certain. He has always been so kind to me, bringing me water at night, pulling the blanket over my shoulders so I don't

catch a chill, bringing me ice cubes to chew on when I feel the taste of iron welling up in my mouth because of all the medicine I am forced to ingest. He must not think that I am not aware of everything he has done for me.

There is something about him that is strangely familiar and painful at the same time. Like watching a sad movie and not being able to look away even if it hurts, because somehow we need the pain. Don't be so hard on me whoever you are. I have had a hard life, I have carried my cross. I loved, then hated. I gave, then, gave up. I hoped, then I was hopeless. Righteousness leads you to thorny roads. Now I am an old woman. It was yesterday we were twenty. That is what people say. It is true you know. It was yesterday.

And you are a pretty boy you know. I can tell you have a good soul. Why? Ah. I saw you in the garden, the way you smelled the dirt and let it run through your fingers. You said: 'We can plant lavender here, would you like this?'

You don't want to fight against nature. You said you are not one of those who would go against the soil. You said lavender. Lavender would grow well here.

And you said we. You always say we. I admire you for this. For your perseverance. Some days I believe you. Perhaps I am your mother. But the thought that I cannot remember anything makes my throat go dry because who forgets their children? Who forgets having borne a life? I have heard of a kind of monkey in a far away country that is so stupid it sometimes forgets its young behind, and these young die. It is not on purpose, no, it is just because it forgets. It's sad. This cannot be me. You understand? I cannot let this be me.

At the same time I have memories you know. That is why what you say cannot be true. The forest behind the house for example, I know there are black berries at the top of the hill and in July they are ripe, so ripe they stain the tips of fingers like ink from a felt. I know I used to go there and eat until my tongue turned blue. There were bees there, I remember. Once I was stung. No. It was not bees. Wasps. Yes, I was stung by wasps. I was on my way back, a little load of berries in my hand and as my foot struck the ground, I disturbed an underground nest. A swarm of wasps like arrows came from a hole under my feet. An army on a raid. Yet, I had taken this path many times before, but wasps do settle in fast. Like the nest under our roof back at the house: one day there was nothing, the next day a huge nest hung above our head and I sneaked out at night to remove it because at night they are asleep and they would not hurt me.

So I started to run fast and I squeezed the berries in my hand. One wasp stung my neck but I continued running until I was far enough and I had to stop to catch my breath. I felt fire on my ankle. I lifted the tip of my dress and I saw it, one wasp was still on my leg and I hit it with the back of my hand. How many more were hiding in the creases of my clothes? I ran faster, got home, put ice on my ankle. I can't stand bees or wasps around me since then, I get very scared.

Son. I say the word just to see how it feels. Son. Son. Son. Son. No. I feel nothing. Nothing at all. Surely this is impossible if what you say it is true? Many times I have asked you to stop calling me mother. I have told you it upsets me. Maybe, you can't understand. You don't have children. If you did you would know they are impossible to forget.

You accused me of stealing your blue gown.

'I did not touch it,' I said.

Liar. Give it back. I am no fool.

'Mother,' I said. But it was the wrong thing to say and you threw a shoe at me. I picked it up and put it away.

Give me my blue gown. I want you to stop looking at me. Stop being around me. Because I don't know who you are and you should get it into your head. Into your head. And I don't like you around. You are a desperate soul and that is why you are staying here and breathing my air because no one wants you so you think that hanging around an old woman is better than nothing, but you see, I don't want you. Even me, I don't want you here. You know, if you were my son I would be ashamed. Yes, ashamed.

You threw the other shoe at me as if I was some kind of stray dog you wanted to get rid of. You were having a bad day I told myself. Maybe you were in pain, you take strong medicine for the pain, for your headache, but perhaps now it is not enough. I wanted to give you something to calm you and put you to sleep, but you would not take it, you threw the water at me. The doctor told me that there might be a time when I will have enough. That perhaps it would be better if I were to put you away, before it happens. 'Don't forget that it will not be her, it is already not her, the tumour will change your mother,' he said. But it's

hard to believe because it looks like you, it is you standing in front of me, being ashamed of me, it is you, it is your face, it is your voice, how can it not be you?

Yesterday you found one of his shirts in the cupboard and you wrapped it around your neck burying your nose in it looking for his smell.

He is gone.

‘Yes, he is gone.’

But he is going to come back.

‘No, he is not going to come back mother.’

You did not believe me, you shouted, *I hate you, I hate you.* And the whole afternoon you sat outside. I brought you tea, you did not drink it. I brought you a piece of pie I had bought at a farm stall, you did not touch it.

Do you really think it is like sleeping? You pointed at something on the grass: a little brown mouse rolled on its side, dead. *Do you think it's like sleeping?*

‘I don't know mother.’ I took your hand.

You used to sit outside often when you were well. You read a lot, and you hated sad stories. Everything had to be uplifting, or at least have a moral. When you did not like the ending you threw the book across the garden and I found them when I came to visit you. Another sad story I told myself.

What could I possibly tell you now? Whatever I would say, it would be sad. Or I would be the liar yet again. Maybe it would be better I thought, if I pretended, just once, just this once, to not be your son.

So I told you that if you wanted, I would take you downtown and we could have coffee at the coffee corner-shop because they have the best coffee, freshly ground beans, and also they serve the best toasted tomato sandwich on brown bread with lots of cheese (and I almost gave myself away by saying the way you like them, but I kept quiet), and after we could go to the nursery, the one on St-Georges Street, passing the church that is now a concert hall, the antique shop, the city hall, and we could pick a whole bunch of flowers for the house. Or we could take the chair lift and go up the mountain, sit and enjoy the view. And if you were well enough, we could take a little walk there, maybe we would find jasmine to put in your room, it is the season now.

‘Would you like this?’

Who are you? And what do you want from me?

‘You don’t know me, but you can trust me. I just want to be your friend.’

You considered me for a while and you stood up, but you were weak, you wanted to go to sleep.

I half expected you would have agreed. I know your body is failing you now. But somehow I imagined you would be alright, that we would take this walk. I have these crazy ideas lately that things can change suddenly. Perhaps it is because of the season, with all this nature blooming around. It is hard to think some things are not going to make it.

Paul is speaking to me again. He does not hang out with Martin anymore because Martin never wants to do anything. His mother just gave birth to a new little sister, her name is Emily. That is what Martin told us during the morning chat.

‘It is wonderful Martin, how many days is she?’ the teacher said.

Martin considered the question for a while then said: ‘nine months and a week.’

The teacher laughed and said that she was one week then, because when you are born, you start at zero. He said he understood all of this very well, but that really, it did not make sense. I thought about it and I think it’s not fair either. For me, now, I am eleven and a half years old, which means I am almost twelve, and it is not the same at all as being just eleven.

Jonathan said he went on a plane this week end to visit his grand-parents because they live far away and he said it was the first time he took a plane and it shook a lot and it did not make him feel very well. The teacher laughed and said he was air-sick. She said some people get car-sick too. Jenny said she got horse-sick because she went on a horse and the horse jolted on his front legs and she fell and it made her very scared and almost sick.

I did not want to say anything and the teacher said that I must share at least one thing. 'I made a wish,' I said. And I told her that I did not want to say what it was because if you tell a wish, then it doesn't happen.

I wonder where Sophia is. She is a good friend of mine, but maybe she does not want to see me, frail like I am now. She is such a strong woman. She has always been more assertive than me, never needed anyone. I remember us as young girls back in the valley. She lived just down the little hill, a very little hill, but it was enough for me to ride my bicycle all the way to her house without spinning the pedals once. She had a bird, a parrot, and it sang loudly every time she came in the house. It was adorable at first to have something that liked her so much, but then it became difficult when she wanted to sneak out of her room to go out to the pubs because when she came back late at night, it sang and woke her parents up. In the end, she had it put down. She never let anyone or anything stand in her way.

And there was this boy that liked her, I can't even remember his name now, Hugo? No. Nicolas? I don't know. She had been with boys before, but not me, I was too shy. Every time, she had this look on her face, you don't know, it said, you're still just a child. Then, I had enough. And she did not want him, Hugo, or Nicolas, whatever his name was, and she said: 'He is nice, I can arrange something. Do you want him?' Girls are like this. They negotiate. This one you can have, this one not. Men don't realise. Or they just play along. I was pretty and I knew I could have him, if I wanted too. If I wanted too.

I said fine and she arranged for me so we went to the movies, we sat next to each other. I think he put a hand on my thigh, but I don't know now, because I was so nervous, and afraid. He took me to his place, his parents were upstairs and we stayed in the basement. It was furnished with a couch, a TV, video games. We lay on the carpet and I let him run his hand under my shirt, over my breasts. We did not go all the way, just playing as he said. Playing. I lay still. A stiff doll. Playing. I did not really like him. I did not have the burn in my stomach, I was not attracted to him, but I had to go through this. To be like her. When it got late I wanted to leave and, he walked me to the bus stop. I went home. He phoned the next day, but I did not answer. I did not want to see him again. The phone rang

and rang; it rang the whole morning. I phoned Sophia, speak to him I said. Tell him I don't want to see him again.

In the afternoon, he stopped calling. I never heard from him again. Later she told me he had gone to the shop early in the morning and bought me a CD. 'He really liked you,' she said. Of course. Of course.

Sophia has always been free. She was not afraid of men like me. I don't know why it was so difficult for me. Maybe I could read them too well. I remember when I was just a little girl when the teacher kissed us good night during summer camp. He came, tucked all of us in our bed, and pulled the blanket over our shoulders. Like a mother. Like a father. But he was a man. And it was strange for me. I have always been afraid like this.

Sophia, she never cried for a man. Never. Even for this boy that she liked so much. She had gone overseas for a few days, taking a holiday on the sunshine coast and this boy, who was her boyfriend at the time, did not want to come with her. When she came back she went straight to his place, laid her luggage on the floor.

'I am here,' she said.

'So I see,' was his answer.

He did not care for her anymore, but he was too selfish to say anything, he was going to let her figure it out. She was proud. She was not one of those who would say: 'You don't want me anymore?' or throw him insults, no, she would not let him see her pain. Not Sophia. She stayed there for a few days and pretended. Then she left while he was at work. She packed her stuff and just left without even leaving a note.

She never let anyone influence her, and she always put her desires first. Some call it selfishness, but at the same time, maybe one should be selfish with oneself because life quickly passes us by. Look at me now. My body is giving in.

Why all of this now? Because I am trying too hard to remember. All of this is coming back to me because this man wants me to remember. I don't know who he is. Yet he is staring at me as if he is seeing something I don't see. Like a cat that can see into the spirit world. At the hospice downtown, there is a cat that sits on patient's laps when their death is near, and when it happens, the doctors summon the family. It is as if the cat can see

something we can't, a strange aura perhaps, or a light. I don't know how it is. I am afraid. I wish this man would stop looking at me.

Annabelle came for the day because I phoned her. You are too hard with me, the water is never warm enough, or too cold, and it is never the right dress that I bring to you, and the sky is never clear enough, the curtains are too drawn, and there are all these shadows in the room, all these shadows, and it is my fault, I should have left a light on you said, because it is so dark. The other day you spat at me, can you believe it? Like a common lama you spat at me. You were angry because you said that I should keep the room tidier, and I said that if you would stop shifting things around, it would be easier. You called me an idiot because I did not understand. And I said that I was an idiot who was fool enough to take care of you and wake up in the middle of the night to bring the orange juice you requested.

You snorted at this and said: *I did not ask you to do this. I did not ask you to take care of me like this. You can leave me if you want. It's not like I am in any position to keep you here. I don't need your pity. And I have already told you, I would rather not have you around.* There was a pause before you said: *And don't think that I am about to die anytime soon. That's right. If you think you are going to get rid of me like my father's brother wife, well you are wrong. You are going to be stuck with me for a long time, and if you are not ready for this, then leave.*

'Don't do this,' I said. 'Don't say things like this. It was never your fault that your father died. Or your mother's.' And this is when you spat at me.

'It is the illness,' Annabelle said. 'Do you want me to come over?'

Do I want her to come here? She should not be asking this, you are her mother too, but she is better at this than me, at protecting her life. Or is it because she has less of a conscience or how else does she keep the guilt away otherwise. She said she would not know what to do. She wouldn't know how to take care of you. You see mother that is what you did by wanting to control everything. Now she is so afraid of doing something wrong that she does nothing at all. Is that what you wanted? I am here for you because after all, you were there for me once. You once gave me a life, literally. But now I find the price is heavy to pay. I too want to be lazy, I want to go drink at the pub on Friday nights, fool

around, meet women, go out, but I have put everything on hold because soon you will be gone and I suppose there will be time for all of this then. But some things might not come back. Do you know that the owner of the nursery contacted me last month, 'would you be interested in going abroad?' he said. He is opening franchises all over and he needs someone like me, he said, for his new shops in Europe. Like me. In Europe. I have never been there and I would really want to go. I would go to Spain because I have heard about an artist over there who has designed edifices without using one single straight line. Yes that is true mother. No straight lines. I would very much like to see something like this, something that is allowed to flow, not so vertical, or horizontal, or so rigid. I would very much like to see this mother.

But that would make me selfish, wouldn't it? And that would be wrong. It seems I cannot escape the feeling of being completely inadequate, and I resent you. Every day, I think I hate you more.

Annabelle arrived in the late afternoon and we went out while you were taking a nap, not far, just around the corner, you would be alright she said, and I needed to get out of the house, away from you. She is beautiful. I could see how people stared at her in the street. There is something about her, a remoteness, a distance she keeps as if she is inaccessible, but at the same time a smile that is inviting. She could have all the men she wants if she was not so afraid. Remember when she was with this man you liked so much, Francis was his name. She left him and you were so sad. She said she could not bear the smell of his breath when he had a cold, or if he ate something like garlic, his sweat after a run, when he bit his nails, the drool on the pillowcase. It was the same with us. As soon as she could she left the house and moved to a flat on her own. Where does it come from this absolute disdain for the very facts of life? Is it from fear of letting people get too close? I don't know because she hates it even when it comes from herself. She sleeps in clean sheets every night, takes a bath in the morning, bath at night, keeps herself obsessively tidy. It is not a bad thing I suppose, but it is as if she wants to be some kind of porcelain doll with nails that don't grow and a body that never sweats.

At the pub, a man came and stood next to us: 'Hey, you are the florist,' he said. 'I actually needed to ask you something.'

His wife wanted to have a garden at the back of their houses.

‘Is that something you do?’ he said. ‘I mean, do you go to people’s house and help them with that kind of stuff? I am Peter by the way,’ and he held a hand to me and to Annabelle.

He was not a bad-looking man, dressed in a fancy blue shirt and black pants, probably working in one of the offices down town, but he was drunk, I could tell by the way he spoke and without waiting to be asked he sat onto the bench next to Annabelle.

‘My round,’ he said. ‘What do you drink?’

I ordered a beer and Annabelle asked for a whiskey and soda. The place was hot and stuffy and the man was sweating, there was a trace of a dark circle under his arms. Annabelle was stiff and uncomfortable, I could tell.

‘I have not seen you around before,’ Peter said to her.

‘I don’t live here,’ she said.

He waited, obviously expecting her to engage in the conversation, but she said nothing else.

‘You work nearby?’ I said and I think he was relieved that I spoke and broke the silence.

‘Right,’ he said, ‘just around the corner, but today we went out for lunch to celebrate my friend’s promotion, you see, the man by the bar with the dark shirt, and well, things got a little bit out of hand, but it’s alright. Tomorrow is another day. Another day. When good things happen, we can’t just let them slip by, we must be merry. And he is a good friend of mine. A real good guy, honest and all.’

The waiter brought our drinks and Annabelle welcomed the distraction, holding her drink with both her hands, then pouring soda water into it and watching the liquid fizz.

‘You look a bit uptight,’ he said. ‘Am I that awful or are you just always like this?’

She looked into her glass as if she would find something in it, a gap big enough for her to disappear, a parallel universe. The remark had been painful for her; he had been too direct, and too accurate. So I told him about your illness to distract the attention from her.

‘Well I am sorry to hear this,’ he said. ‘What’s wrong with her?’

‘Cancer,’ I said.

‘Oh, I see. My cousin died of cancer last year. A real shame, in the end he was all thin and all. I could barely look at him. A real shame.’

I did not blame him for this; that is what people do when confronted with another person’s misfortune; they try to express compassion by relating to it. It was like this when Claire left. Everybody started telling me about their own break-up, how it had happened to

them or their friend and I found myself suddenly burdened by more heartbreaking stories than I could bear.

In the end only Peter and I spoke, mainly about gardening and what he should or should not plant, and when to do it. He organised to come and see me at the nursery. 'Maybe I'll see you around,' he said to Annabelle and she just waved her hand, but said nothing.

'You could have been a little friendlier,' I said.

'Why? I am honest and I did not feel like talking.'

'You can't live your life like this. You'll find yourself to be lonely someday.'

'Mind your own business,' she said.

'It is not like you can talk. I have tried at least, and now it is not by choice.'

'Everything is a choice,' she said.

'Maybe you can afford to see things like this Annabelle, but me, I just don't' have the heart.'

'Well that is your own trouble. Me I am free.'

'Free? Please. You can't even sit next to a man just because he is sweating a little, and you call yourself free?'

'He disgusted me, what's wrong with this?'

In our class we have a gerbil that we named Gremlin because the tip of one of its ears is cut and it looks like a little gremlin. And there is a chores board in class and every day each of us is assigned one different chore. It can be switching off the lights at the end of class, emptying the class bin and one of them is to be in charge of Gremlin. This person must feed it, give it water and is also allowed to hold it for a while. Today it is my turn. And I am thrilled.

When I take Gremlin out of its cage Paul comes to me and says he wants to hold it. I do not want to give it to him because it is *my* turn, but I cannot say no either or he won't be my friend anymore. So I pass it to him and he pats it for a while.

Then Martin comes and he wants to hold it as well. Then it is Lisa. And Baby Lucy. Gremlin goes around like a merry-go-round and when I finally get it in my hands it is so agitated that I have to hold it tight for it not to jump onto the floor. I pat its soft little head but it bites me and tries to climb back into the cage but I do not let it, I hold my grip, and it knocks its nose slightly against the cage. I see a little bit of blood, but I say nothing. Paul's nose bleeds all the time and it is just because he is allergic to milk, but sometimes he eats ice-cream anyway and then his nose bleeds. But Gremlin is very quiet now and when I shake him, he doesn't move at all. And then it is strange because it was all warm and nice in my arms, but now suddenly I can feel it's not. I know that something is wrong. The teacher takes Gremlin from my hand and she says it is not well. Then, I start to cry, but she says: 'It's not your fault, these things happen.' But I know it is not true. I killed Gremlin.

She tells the class Gremlin must have been sick. Gerbils don't live for very long, she says. But it is a lie. She tells a lie to protect me. Like my father did when he did not want to upset mother. When he sometimes smoked inside the house and he didn't tell her. Or when he broke the pretty vase in the kitchen and threw the pieces away. Or when he took me to the shop and bought me a bag full of sweets just to make me happy. Once he even asked me to forget something because he said it would just upset me and it was better, he said: 'Just forget it Ok, just forget.' And I tried because I forget things all the time, but it was harder than I thought.

I sometimes close my eyes and concentrate very hard trying to see his face. I remember what he looks like, but I cannot really see him in my head. It is just like a dream, like when you know you dreamed of someone even though you could not really see the person because people don't really have a face in dreams. The other day I thought I heard him at school. I heard his voice, but when I looked back I realised it was not him. Mother cried every day when he left. Then, it was not as often, but still a lot. Now, it's just sometimes, and most of the time, not in front of me even though I can hear her from my bedroom.

I ask the teacher if I can hold Gremlin one more time before she takes him away. She says: 'Of course' and I pat his head and press my cheek against its fur. I

say: 'I am sorry Gremlin, I'm sorry.' But I know this is going to be something very hard to forget.

My head is heavy today and I wish I would be able to unscrew it from my shoulders and lay it on the table for a while, just not to have this weight. Do you think it is the tumour? That it is like a rock in my brain pressing over me, or a cork keeping me tightly plugged inside of myself until the right time comes. The right time, if there is such a thing.

Yesterday I played this game and imagined that everything around me was drawn with just one continuous line and I followed the line with my finger tracing the wall of my room and my bed-side table and the red lamp on it. I imagined it was like this magic sketching board that has sand inside; if you shake it, the picture you made disappeared, and I shook my head just to see.

They are some days I can't see very well; my vision has started to blur and sometimes it is like looking at the world from behind a window when it rains and the contours are not defined because the drops of water refract the light. Every day, I never know how it will be; a lot of things seem to be happening to me.

I can't taste food anymore. Everything is bland no matter how much salt I put on it, and it doesn't help because I am not even hungry. I am slowly dissolving like a cube of sugar in a coffee mug, and you try so hard to put something into me—if you could force feed me, I think you would, like a mother bird regurgitating in the mouth of her young.

I am surprised you have kept me here. You said you have an apartment at the top of the nursery and sometimes you go there. I suppose it is to escape me, but you can rarely leave the house now because I can't be left on my own for too long in case I pee all over myself; it is not good to stay in wet clothes. And I like company even if I tell you that I don't want you around. It is a lie. I don't want to be alone. I don't want to die alone. The doctor could not tell me how long I had left, if I would have control over it and lie in my bed and fold the sheet neatly under my arms and say my last words and close my eyes gracefully. It could very well happen while I try to take a shit (which is a hard thing now because of the medicine I take, I am supposed to eat prunes and things like this, but really I don't give a

damn anymore if my body does not evacuate what it has to, I am full of poison anyway), or it could happen while I eat or sit by the window, he could not tell because the tumour is growing and someday it is just going to short-circuit my brain and it will shut itself down. So you see, I would rather you stay with me. Just in case.

And I am afraid now, so afraid. Every time I close my eyes I wonder if I will ever see the light again. You know, I have been told that if someone has a heart attack while sleeping, he or she has very little chance of surviving. Now imagine this. It makes you want to do anything just to stay awake. No wonder we are so afraid of monsters in cupboards when we are children; night is a scary thing. I never slept well, always held Frankie's hand. But he is gone now, and I am waiting for him to come back. Frankie, please forgive me. You need to come back now because I can't bear it to be alone like this.

I have borrowed a wheel chair from the hospital and I have taken you out, just behind the house. We didn't go far, but it seemed to mean a great deal for you to walk in the wood again. The sky was covered, but the air was warm, and you seemed happy. *Can you hear this?* I heard branches cracking somewhere in the distance, the wind perhaps, but you said we might see a buck: *I would very much like this*, you said. Your voice was different, like I have heard it a long time ago, not as hard, and lighter as if it did you good to be outside. As if the house was weighing you down. I had never thought of this before, but perhaps it is true.

We used to come here often. In the winter you took me for long walks and we always came across a dozen different foot prints: deer, racoons and people too sometimes. *Look*, you would say, *look how busy it is in here*. But now without the snow there was no proof, and it seemed as if we were the only ones out here. In the autumn we came to pick up colourful leaves and you showed me how to keep them pressed between the pages of a book for them to dry flat. You loved the smell of autumn; sweet and fragrant, it was nothing like back in the valley because there were no large forests like here. You helped me rake the leaves from the courtyard and we would make the biggest pile we could and you watched me while I ran and jumped into it. Sometimes I said: 'Jump with me mummy.'

But you said you did not want to because it was full of dirt, and there were not enough leaves to catch your fall.

‘But I do it mummy, look I am not afraid.’

Yes that is true, you said, you are much braver than me.

We did not see the buck and you were sad, but still you enjoyed the walk. Maybe I should take you out more; I tend to forget how dependant you are. You slept for most of the afternoon afterward, all curled up in a little ball, like a child, the sheet pulled up to your neck even though it was now hot outside. You are always so cold. *Who wants to live in such a cold land*, you always said. You wanted to go away, somewhere across the borders, along the coast, along the sunshine coast, *would it not be lovely to live somewhere called the sunshine coast? Surely it must be warm there. Surely.* But the winter was beautiful; so many words to describe the snow: crispy, powdery, fluffy, stiff, white, off-white, blue white; you could never leave. You are a woman for whom places have meaning. You once left the land of your youth to come here because of all the pain, but since then you have rooted yourself in and it would take more than a storm to force you away.

You slept peacefully, with a steady breath, and your face had more colour than before and I thought maybe you would wake up and it would be gone, the tumour, all of it gone. It’s possible. Everything is possible. Magical recoveries have happened before. And it would mean so much to me to see something like this. It would give me so much hope. I’ll convert, yes I will believe in God; that is what I will do. If you are healed, I will go to church, I’ll become a man of faith, the best, and I’ll travel the world and be a testimony.

But I almost regretted it, because again, this would confine me, prevent me from living my life, yet again. I would be a prisoner of fate.

I did not tell mother about Gremlin because maybe it would make her cry again. I know the teacher said it was not my fault, but it is not entirely true because I held him too hard, I wanted him to stay in my arms.

I did not sleep very well last night. I left a light on and when mother was ready to go to sleep she switched it off, but I was not asleep yet. Outside I could hear the

wind lapping against the wall of the house and it was as if someone wanted to get into my room, but I could not close my eyes because if I did I saw Gremlin.

I thought about the little piglets we once saw at the science lab. One day Paul and I sneaked into the lab because we wanted to see all the things that were kept in the secret cupboard at the back. Paul said we might find dangerous stuff like things to make a bomb and this is when we saw the piglets in little jars swimming in some kind of liquid, just like the pickled cucumbers my mother kept in our pantry. Paul wanted to open one jar, but I did not want too because I was too scared. In the end we did it anyway and it smelled funny, a very sharp smell that reminded me of something, but I could not say what. Paul said the liquid is there to preserve them so they don't rot like old fruits. It's funny this because Martin once forgot a piece of cake at the bottom of his drawer and he only found it later on, maybe months later, and there was a kind of plant with a single leaf that had grown in it. I wondered if it could happen with the piglets. Paul touched it and he said it was like touching cold chicken, and the piglets were not pink, they were white. He wanted to steal one jar and I said: 'What are you going to do with it?' and he said he would like to keep it in his room, but we heard some noise in the corridor and he put it back on the shelf and we quickly ran out.

I am not going to go back to school because everyone will be too angry with me because of Gremlin. I will stay here. Perhaps I can lock the door and it is going to be my den, just like I have seen in the movies when people want to hide from a war or something. I should get provisions before, go in the kitchen quietly and bring some food back. But I am too scared to go into the corridor and it is too dark.

Memories are seeping out of me like running water, and there is nothing I can do to hold them in. Every day you seem to be getting angrier at me, is it because I can't remember you? I know the doctor told you that you must forgive me for this. Please do. Please forgive me.

It was nice to go for a walk, to take in some fresh air, to see new things around me. You know some memories came back to me while we were walking, but I did not tell you. Somehow I felt that I had come there before, with you, walking along this path, but it's not possible is it? Have we ever come here together? I know the wood well, of this I am convinced. I knew that ahead of us a row of pine trees, and evergreens waited, standing upright like soldiers, and I used to pick the cones in the winter, covered them with peanut butter and hung them from a string in the tree next to the house and watch the birds and the squirrel eat from it. But we did not get there, we could not go far. I was holding you up, but it's not my fault, you know this.

When is that girl coming back? I said. You did not know. Do you want me to call her? I thought for a while, yes, I want you to call her. I like when she comes and brushes my hair, dresses me in nice clothes, it is nice to be looked after. I am not saying you are not taking good care of me, but it is just that sometimes, you don't understand what I need. I heard you say over the phone that I had a good day, who were you speaking too? Were you speaking to that girl? Or was it someone else? You seem so awfully lonely sometimes. I know I can't be of good company, an old woman like me. But it has not always been the case. I used to be merry and I danced a lot. Every week, I went dancing. That is how I met Frankie. On the dance floor on St-Joseph Street. Sophia was there too. Did I ever tell you how it happened? He told me I was beautiful. I caught his eyes with my silly moves and he bought me a drink, I think I had an apricot sour with sugar on the rim of the glass. It was so delicious I had a second one and it made him laugh the fact that I could take so much pleasure in a drink. Later on he told me that it is what he liked the most about me, the fact that I enjoyed life so much; I could sit in the sun for a whole day, being content, just enjoying, or have a perfect day just because I had the best lemon pie or because we swam in the lake on a really hot day. But all of this changed one day because I wanted something else. Or maybe it was because I did not know what I wanted anymore.

You know this tends to happen; life gets in the way and you just let things slip, like a slimy fish through your hands. And it is hard to make things the way they were. It is hard.

Is that why you are alone? I see you sometimes sitting alone in your chair and I wonder why there is no woman in your life, is it because of me? Please do tell me, I wouldn't want this. It is not good for someone to be alone like this, I know this too well. Look at me now waiting. Waiting for Frankie to come back and this wait is going to kill me one way or

the other. Perhaps I should not say this, but I am impatient. It is my fault that he left. I was too hard with him. You know, he wanted to build a little wood house in the tree behind the house, but I did not let him. I said it was stupid. And there were birds living in the tree, a whole family of red-throats and I was not going to let him cut branches and disturb their peace. And there would have been nails everywhere and I would have not been able to walk bare-foot in the garden anymore, and the noise of the hammer, and the saw and things like this, no I said, you are not going to build a house in the tree.

But I should have said nothing because eventually it came right back at me. At first it was little revenges, like the day he brought the rabbit home and ate it in front of me. Then, there was more silence between us. And eventually we became strangers. He did not want to hold my hand while I slept, and I did not wait by the door for him when he came back from work. I didn't even get up I think, for me it was just wind, wind pushing the front door, wind in the house, making my heart go cold, no, I did not even get up anymore.

This morning you woke up and you wanted to go for a walk again. You should rest, I said, but when I looked at you I was surprised to find that you seemed stronger. You wanted to eat and I made you an egg on toast. I watched you eat everything with a good appetite and you said: *are we going to go for this walk?* So I took you and you did not want to use the wheel-chair because you felt strong enough to walk on your own. I let you try and you made it all the way out of the garden by just holding my hand and you even bent down to pick a few twigs of lavender. You said you were not so dizzy anymore.

You wanted me to phone Annabelle and walk with her on the main road to get gelato, somehow you remembered this, and go to the old theatre and watch a movie. You even fetched the bowl where you kept all the objects that you had gathered over the years and I could see in your eyes that you started remembering.

In the afternoon I phoned the doctor and he said I should bring you in for a scan. So I did and we even went that very day. He could not believe it, but the tumour had shrunk. All the chemotherapy tablets you have been taking have sent the tumour into a corner like a naughty child. It was hard to make sense of it, but it seemed as though you were getting better. Yes mother, it is true. You had revolted against the chemotherapy for weeks and I

almost had to force the tablets down your throat. They made you so ill that you looked like a ghoul, with dark circles under your eyes, purple veins against your pale skin and you were only skin on bones because you barely ate anything. Many times, you spat them at me. But you see in the end they saved you.

We must wait now, that is what the doctor said. I phoned Annabelle to tell her the news and she said we should not be so excited about this because bad blood is hard to cure. I know this, but this is the only day of hope I have been given and I shall embrace it. I am not going to scare the good fortune away with bad thoughts.

And you have been a good girl mother—that is what it means. You have been forgiven. I am the happiest person in the world, but I do fear that you will start to remember everything. It is memory that has been gnawing at your life for the past years and if it all comes back again, will you be able to stop it doing the same thing again? I guess it is too soon to think about it now. We should be taking one day at a time—that is what the doctor said, until days become weeks, and weeks become months, and months turn into years. Only then should you be grateful.

I wet my bed again. Mother sighed when she saw it.

'I am sorry,' I said. 'I am sorry.'

I told her about Gremlin. She listened to me without a word and after she burst into tears.

'It is not your fault my angel, it is not your fault,' she said.

But I did not believe her because she was crying so much and that is because I did something very bad.

I remember a few years ago she found out that I had stolen a set of little plastic soldiers and a do-it-yourself car model set. She came across the things while cleaning my room and I said that it was Paul's stuff and that he gave it to me. Of course she did not believe this because I had asked for these things in the shop a few weeks ago so she wanted to speak to him to see if I was telling the truth. I could see in her eyes that I had made her really sad when she realized I had lied. She forced me to go to church and confess what I had done to the priest and so I went

and he listened and told me to say fifteen Our Father on my knees and ask for forgiveness. I promised I would never do something so terrible again. But she has the same look in her eyes now and that is because I am a bad boy.

I said: 'I'm sorry I'm sorry I'm sorry I won't do it anymore' and my face burned with tears. Jesus is going to be angry with me and he won't grant me my wish. Father is not going to come home soon and all of this is my fault. My fault.

I have been feeling better lately. I can almost look at the sun without feeling too much pain in my eyes, or in my head. I do feel lighter. Is it only an impression or is it true that the mass I have been carrying for so long has started to melt like an ice cube in the sun? If this is true and I shall have a few years ahead of me I promise that I have learned my lesson.

I will not be afraid of silences anymore. I will embrace it. I will bow down on my knees everyday to kiss the soil under my feet and I will praise the air coming in and out of my nostrils too; I will not take anything for granted anymore. Every day I'll feed the birds that have been so kind to me whistling at my window and keeping me company. I'll show more compassion to people. I'll be kind to him, the man who had been with me all this time. I am almost sure that it will come back to me very soon the fact that he is my son. I have been looking at him intensely and something tells me that this is true.

And Annabelle phoned this evening. I wanted to speak to her. This sweet voice of her made my stomach knot and brought tears to my eyes. It stirred something in me: I remembered a little girl running over sprinklers saying: 'Look at me mother, look at me.'

While I looked through pictures, another vision came to me. I saw this girl, Claire is her name I am almost sure of this now. She was wearing a blue dress, but it was stained with blood and I saw her standing by the sink in the kitchen, scrubbing the stain with a little brush using the green magic soap—we called it this because it could get rid of almost any stains. But she rubbed and rubbed and the stain would not go away. I said: 'You'll tear your dress if you continue like that.' She turned around and looked at me with eyes that were full of rage and tears. I am not sure if this is a dream or a memory. But the vision felt very real too me

and it gave me shivers. Something inside me told me that I knew she had done something bad.

If this true and I am healed, I promise I will stop having so many regrets. It has become clear to me that I have been a pathetic woman continuously harbouring sad thoughts, always blaming the world for having been so unkind to me. And I do believe that in a way I am partly responsible for the tumour, and I shall try not to kill myself again.

There was almost no one at the nursery today so I decided to take a stroll on the main road. It was filled with the noise of people sitting on the terraces sipping something to praise the warmth that had gently settled in the afternoon. There were a few familiar faces among the crowds, but I walked quickly to escape them. Along the sidewalk I passed the boutiques, the pubs, the coffee shop, the hippy store with the bright-coloured clothes exposed in the front window, the Indonesian furniture dealer, and the Lebanese restaurant where I sometimes ate baklavas and had mint tea. A band was playing in one of the bars and I could hear the music, the jazzy rhythm breaking out onto the street, I was tempted to have a drink. I entered the place, walked across the gloomy hall leading to the terrace smelling of wood and spilled beers. I found myself thinking of this one girl I had met here. It was here, while I was drinking at this very bar. Next to me were three girls and from their rouged cheeks and their animated conversation I could tell they had been drinking for a while. One of the girls had very blond hair, almost white, and by her accent I could tell she was not from here, English I thought. I overheard her say: 'Can I have a rum and coke please, but can you put looooots of rum.' She tilted her head to the side, smiled slowly at the waiter and it was absolutely beautiful, and her drunkenness captivated me because she was not afraid of it, nor ashamed. She noticed my stare and when she got her drink she raised her glass slightly to me, gave me a smile.

'Where are you from?' I said.

She was English.

'What are you doing here?'

'Travelling,' she said.

'Do you like it?'

She smiled and downed her drink.

‘What’s not too like?’

I raised my glass to her, it was one of those thick and sturdy whiskey glasses, but when our glasses met my movement was too abrupt, and my enthusiasm too great and the glass she was holding shattered in her hands. I was expecting her to yell at me, call me an idiot, but she laughed. She went to the bathroom and came back with a piece of toilet paper wrapped around her wrist. She was bleeding, not a lot, but I could see a red stain seeping right through the paper. She sat down, ordered another round of drinks as if it was nothing. We were sitting at this exact same spot and I find myself searching for the blood stain on the counter. Of course, it had long been wiped away.

It flattered me that she wanted to stay even though the wound must have been sore, even though she was hurt. We left the place together that night, went to the backpacker where she was staying and we did it on the small bunk bed, our bodies lit by the pale light of a shabby lamp standing on a little stool while the others stayed behind at the bar. Her friends giggled when they saw us leave hand in hand: ‘Have fun,’ they said.

It was just like Claire said it would be, stiff, with a struggle to find a tender move and a common place. It was as if the scene was happening before me, as if I was looking from behind glass, as if I was only a witness. I never told Claire about her, because it did not mean anything, and it would have hurt her.

Claire. Just the thought of her now and my stomach twists, but I think it is just an automatic response. Like Pavlov’s dog because I had loved her for so long. I said love. Yes, perhaps I had loved her. But it all seems so far away now.

Had she ever had an affair, I wonder. But I think she was too moralistic for this. When one of her girlfriends admitted to her that she had cheated on her husband she made a great fuss about of it. She rejected her, said she could not be her friend anymore because it would be immoral to support that kind of behaviour.

‘But she is your friend,’ I said. ‘It is not you she has betrayed.’

‘But what does it make me if I stay friends with her?’

She was always afraid of this, of what it would make her.

She became a hairdresser because she liked to change people, make them better. I always thought she was a strong woman who knew what she wanted. Just before she

announced to me she wanted to go overseas, she kept her distance from me and I thought her coldness meant I was not good enough for her anymore. I don't know where it came from this feeling of alienation. But it happened rather suddenly. She was reading the newspaper and that is when she saw the ad about this project in Africa, and I saw it in her eyes. I knew she wanted to go. I didn't even try to hold her back. She didn't want me to, and I did not have the courage, or the arguments. I am not sure if I really miss her or if I wish that I would not be so alone now.

We got new pets. This morning when I got to class there was a big box and the teacher said that inside were our new friends for the class and she lifted the bowl from the box and we all saw what it was.

We had to find a name for them and the girls wanted to give names like Apple and Cherry, and the boys wanted to name them Corvette and Ferrari or something like this. We ended up calling them Sunny and Sky because one was yellow like the sun and the other one was blue. There would be no more fights about who was going to hold them. And also everybody would forget about Gremlin.

It was also 'table talk' day again and Jonathan wanted to start as always; he never respects the rule of telling only one event. He told us that his mother was at the hospital today. His mother is expecting a little brother and the other day she came to school and she let us touch her belly. It was strange because she said: 'Wait, you'll see, he might kick' and he did and I saw the skin lift as if his brother was going to rip out of her belly. I did not want to touch anymore, but she said, 'Don't be afraid.' The teacher asked if everything was alright with his little brother and he said that he was not going to have a brother anymore because he had a headache and that is why his mother was at the hospital.

I told mother about this and she said it was very sad. I knew his little brother was dead, like Gremlin, and it did not make me feel very well because I would not like this to happen to me because sometimes my head hurts, but she said it was not that kind of headache. And then she pressed my head against her chest and rocked

me. *Sleep. Sleep. Child sleep. Sleep is going to slip, slip, slip inside you. Sleep. Sleep. Child you must sleep.* And I was less afraid. I like when mother sings song to me.

Clearing, tossing, tearing. Kicking and pulling. Big spring cleaning. Big head spinning. Dark clouds in the sky. The rain is coming, pressing the grass to the ground. Depression. De-pressure. Deep-pressure. Thunder. Someone is knocking at my door. 'Who is it?'

'Mother.'

It is this man again, what does he want from me? He calls me mother and follows me everywhere as if I am the mother goose. It's sad.

'What?'

'Are you ok?'

It's funny he should be asking the question.

'What are you doing?' he says.

I am on the toilet you fool. What should I tell him? Ah what the hell.

'I'm on the loo.'

I hear little steps retreat. In truth, I am not on the toilet, I am hiding.

'Mother.'

For Goodness sake how long is one allowed to be on the toilet? All depends on the business, right? It seems this man is not going to grant me extra time. He is banging on the door now. He is going to take it down. Is it pine? For goodness sake.

'I'm coming out.'

'Mother, are you ok?'

What business does he have with me to always be so concerned about my well-being?

'I thought something happened to you?' he said.

Well Mister X there are indeed a lot of things that can happen to someone between the walls of the bathroom. And most of these events are better left untold. But I don't say anything because I don't feel like him looking at me with his big round eyes. I squeeze past him and sit on the chair where he lets me sit all day if I stare aimlessly at the wall.

I know he went out last night. I heard him sneaking in my room to see if I was asleep, I kept my eyes close, pretended to be asleep like a child so that he would go and leave me alone for once. I can't always think clearly when he is around. He always expects so much from me. And I don't always want a witness; I am embarrassed. When he helps me undress so I can take a bath, when he washes my soiled clothes, has he ever asked himself if I wanted him to see all of this?

I have started to feel numbness in the right side of my face and I find it difficult to chew. Already I can't hold saliva in my mouth and this morning it just drools out of my mouth like a dog or a new-born. And I suppose that if it continues like I will not be able to talk too. Perhaps he would be glad about this.

I wonder sometimes how his life was before me. Often he looks at the picture of this woman on the shelf. I know this look, because once, it was mine. It is the look of someone who lost something. Or the look of regrets. Which one is it? Perhaps both.

Every time I see him looking at this woman an immense sadness and distress invades me as if something is escaping me. Do I know her? Tell me. I dreamed about her the other day, or at least, I think it was her. She was chasing me around a field full of flowers; I was wearing a long dress and I kept tripping on the hem of it, she was closing down on me and I was scared. I was scared of her. It is not the first time I have had this dream.

Is the pretty girl coming back? I wish she would stay a little because it would be nice to have some voices around me. When are you coming back Frankie? How long will I have to stay with this stupid man? It has been hard since you have been gone. I miss the days when we took the car and drove aimlessly not knowing where to go, sometimes even driving all the way up the Coast because you knew how much I loved the salty air and the sight of the ocean always brought me peace. Why have you left? Was I not good enough for you? Sophia always said that a man needs to feel appreciated. Appreciated, did I not praise you enough? Perhaps I should have praised when you spent days chopping wood before the winter came. I should have said you were strong. That you were brave. That you were beautiful. I have so many regrets now.

But I will be better. I have looked for the blue dress, the one you bought me, and I will be waiting in it for you. Every day I will be waiting, until you forgive me, until you come back. It is not fair what you are doing you know, staying away like this. You should not be so proud.

And you know I can't live alone, I hate silence too much and I am afraid of the dark. It is true you know, like a little girl I close my eyes at night and don't open them until morning. Like a nervous little bird I sleep, but I am always awake. It is silly, I know. But I am a silly girl. You know. You always told me. But I will be good now. I will love you well.

It is summer now, you should see this. The apple tree in the forest must be in full bloom. And it is green everywhere, the grass is tall and thick; perhaps we could have a picnic in the garden and lie under the sun, that is if you are lucky because lately it has been raining a lot. I would bake some bread and pick berries and make wild berry and lavender jam, and we would cover ourselves with the yellow blanket when the chill comes in the evening, and I will lay my head on your chest and read to you until it is night. Or we could go to the beach and you could show me how well you swim once again, and I will watch Frankie, I promise I will watch, even if I have seen it a thousand times; your arms striking the water, your head coming in and out like a little submarine, I will watch you. Always, I will keep my eyes on you. If you would only come back Frankie.

We were wrong. You are weak once again and this morning when you couldn't stand upright because you were too dizzy I phoned the doctor and he asked me to bring you straight in. You did not want to go and you made a scene in the street when I wheeled you to the car. You shouted: *Look how this man is taking advantage of an old frail woman. Leave me alone crazy man. Leave me alone.* I even saw the neighbour peak from behind the curtains, but he has heard you shout a lot lately and he knows about the cancer. When we got to the clinic the doctor booked you in for a scan. We waited for three hours in the waiting room and I feared that you would make a scene again but you were calm now, resigned I guess. He showed me the tumour on the screen: it had gained in size, and it seemed as if the cancer was even more aggressive than before.

‘How is this possible doctor? You said that she was getting better. You said it had shrunk. And that she was almost going into remission.’ I used an accusatory tone, but in truth I knew very well that he had told me not to rejoice so quickly.

‘It happens,’ he said.

‘So we are going to increase the dosage of the tablets,’ I said, ‘we are going to fight it.’ But he looked at me with kindness and sympathy; I knew it meant we had lost. There was going to be no more battles. We were to make the most of the time you had—that is what he said. You were to stop chemotherapy so you could at least have a certain quality of life for the time you had left. It was not worthwhile to continue. Worthwhile—that is the word he used. He looked straight into your eyes and told you to get ready. You stared at him for a while waiting for something else, but this is all he had to tell you. Get ready.

‘How long?’ I said. ‘How long does she have?’

He did not want to speak in front of you.

‘Weeks,’ he told me. ‘Maybe a couple of months at the most.’

The doctor is a man in his fifties with white hair and skin that has been marked by time. Or is it perhaps something else, like too much deception and despair. When I researched about the cancer I read a lot of articles about brain cancer and found out that it was one of the most difficult to treat. Articles gave very little hope and I wondered why this doctor had dedicated his life to work with patients suffering from it. Why would this man choose this kind of life? Why would a man choose to deliver death rather than life? I guess someone has to do it and perhaps he has seen miracles before. But it is not going to be the case with you mother. And I am so sorry for this.

You could barely walk outside his office having to hold on to me, a hand around my waist until we got to the wheel chair. It must be awful for you since there are some days when you seem to find me almost revolting. At the same time, some days you are mistaking me for father, and I fail to understand how you can confuse me with the man you once loved and a man you abhor. But I suppose love and hate are never far apart.

I did not want to go back to the house. I wanted to drive and drive until I would not be able to anymore and we would pull the car to the side of the road and we would fall asleep and wake up when the rays of sun glared in the window and burned our face. I wanted to go out of town, past the city, and far away from all of this as if there was a way to escape it. A

secret passage in the universe where we could just slip in and disappear. I looked in the rear mirror and saw that you were asleep with your mouth open and a filament of drool on your cheek. It was painful to look at you. Illness is ugly. It is shameful and disgusting. It is very ugly.

I am dying. I swallowed a piece of my pen. I was chewing the tip and now I can't find the cap and I am convinced it fell into the back of my throat. I can feel it there, like a tickle. I breathe with difficulty because I am afraid to dislodge the piece and for it to fall even further because then I will choke. The teacher says: 'What's wrong?' but I don't want to tell her. I look at the clock, school is almost finished. I try not to swallow, but saliva builds up in my mouth and I drool onto a page of my book creating a darkening spot and I wipe it away with the back of my sleeve smearing the ink and the words become impossible to read. When the bell finally rings, I hurry and find my mother waiting for me at the front gate. I tell her that she must take me to a doctor. Immediately. She turns around.

'Are you sick my angel?' and she puts a hand on my forehead.

I tell her what happened and she gives a little laugh. She says that even if I swallowed it, which she doubted because I would have known, then it was already in my stomach now and there was nothing to fear because my body would take care of it. She said she has booked an appointment with my teacher to talk about Paul, but I tell her that the fact that I am dying should come first.

'My angel,' she says and pats my cheek tenderly. We drive off.

When we get home, she gives me juice. I don't drink it. I know the cap is still there. Mother takes another look at me and she says that I am making myself sick. She sees me holding my breath.

'Stop it,' she says.

I tell her that I cannot stop because the cap is stuck in my throat.

'Fine. I'll take you to the doctor.' She takes me by the hand and I squeeze it as hard as the pain I feel in my throat.

The clinic is only a few blocks away from our house. When we enter the room my mother says we must take a seat. I want to see the doctor now, I say, but apparently I have to wait for all the people in the waiting room to go before me. I look around: there is a baby crying, an old man coughing, a young woman with coloured nails like my mother's holding a child that has his hand wrapped in a cloth. I can see the dark colour seeping through it and I know it's blood. I still feel the tickle in my throat and I wonder how much time I have left before the piece moves further down my throat. The doctor finally calls us in and he makes me sit on the little black bed in the corner of the room. It is covered with a large white paper sheet and when I sit it crumples just like when I open a gift. The doctor puts a thermometer in my mouth, listens to my heart and my breathing. He says: 'So, why don't you tell me how you are feeling.'

I tell him: I am dying.

He narrows his eyes and looks at me as if searching for some evidence. I tell him about my pen, and the cap, and I show him how I am struggling to breathe and to swallow. He takes my mother aside, they talk for a while and when he comes back he says that there is nothing wrong with me. I tell him the cap is still there, *I can feel it* and if he does not do anything, I will choke. My mother looks at him anxiously and he says that he will take X-rays just to make sure everything is alright. He takes me to a dark room, makes me undress and put on a heavy shirt. He tells me to press my chest against a large plate and he leaves the room. I wait in the room for a while before he comes back with a large black and white picture.

'Everything is normal,' he says; 'there is nothing there. Look.'

I look and I see nothing. I am relieved, because he is a doctor and if he says I'm fine, then, I'm fine. Maybe I did not swallow the cap after all.

It rained last night, heavy rain falling on the roof, the gutter spurting dirty water in the street, the drain trying to slurp it up, but it was blocked. Water started rising onto the pavement.

'You better have a look at it before we all drown.'

'Brown?' he said. 'Yes the water is brown.'

I rolled my eyes. I can't articulate very well with the left side of my mouth being completely numb now, so I urged him with my eyes to look through the window, and he saw it. He went out, pulled a whole lot of rotten leaves out of the drain and the water started to flow. But I suddenly wished that I had kept silent, that he would have left it because I could have been lucky, very lucky, and it could have rained for days, and maybe it would have really flooded the street and I would have been able to drown myself in it. It would not be too bad to die like this.

This morning the sky has cleared and he has parked me in front of the window in my wheel chair while he goes in my room to make my bed. It is really not necessary, I want to tell him because I'll be back there soon, I feel weary already. It doesn't take much now; all that rain last night, and the wind gusting against the window, all of this exhausted me. It seems the world is after me now. When he comes back I ask him about Sophia, pointing at a photograph on the shelf and raising my eyebrows.

'You remember her?' he says. 'You remember Sophia?'

I nod my head. Sophia. Yes of course, I remember Sophia, why should I not? We shared our youth together.

She is not coming, he tells me.

But why? I make a gesture toward him. I want to hear about Sophia, I want to hear it. I raise both eyebrows.

'You don't know mother?'

I shrug my head, no I don't know.

But he doesn't say anything and he turns my chair a little more and pushes it right in front, a few centimetres from the glass so that I can't see the frame of the window and if the glass was very clean I might have had the impression of being outside, but there is an annoying stain right at the level of my eyes. Now you have secrets? And if I could speak well without being afraid of him not being able to hear me clearly I would say: 'You, my son, and you have secrets?' But it would be wrong because I don't know who he is; I would be deceiving him. But still. He should not hold back secrets from a dying woman.

He says that he is afraid that it would upset me, and I look so pale already today. What could be more upsetting than my near death? I wish to say. The light shutting off in my head. Darkness behind my eyelids. You should tell me I say with my eyes. You should tell me.

She must be dead, that is what I think. Maybe she died recently and I was not even aware of it. Or it was a long time ago and I had forgotten.

'Ish she dead?' I manage to pronounce.

No, you say, but I can see you regret it, you regret to not lie to me because it would be easier, it would be a closed case and I would not ask about her anymore.

'Why?' I say 'Why is shhe not homing?' I stab a finger at his reflexion in the window, he must tell me, he must tell me.

'It's complicated,' he says.

Complicated? No, it is not complicated. The fact that I am dying, that I don't remember who he is, and that I am tired of looking at the garden, but he won't move me, that is complicated. And that every day I try to find familiarity in the things surrounding me, but I don't always do. He must just speak, open this little mouth of his that can articulate so well and just say the words. Make it quick if it so hard to say. Make it quick.

I don't say any of this. He would have not understood half the words I spoke and I would not have been able to speak with a pace that would have given the words enough weight, enough meaning. So I keep silent, and he does not tell me. I try to remember. I know she too left the valley where we grew up, but she was not fleeing it like me, she wanted to study nursing and this is why she moved to the city. She came to visit me almost every week-end. We went to the pub. She did not drink sweet drinks; she drank beer, and whiskey and straight shooters of vodka and she brought men home. Sometimes I went back before her and someone would be there with her and she would hide his shoes behind a desk or a door so that I wouldn't know and the man would be gone before morning. But I knew, I always knew; because I never slept very well and I heard them, or I went to the toilet during the night and I looked around. Once I found the shoes in the pantry.

It is so strange that I can remember all of this. But is it real? Are these my memories or are they the stories of someone else? I don't know now. My head hurts. I'm trying too hard. Too hard. I wish he would pull me away from the window, the sun is hurting my eyes now, and wheel me to the living room, but he is not around. I can hear him in the kitchen rummaging through the cupboard, and there is the sizzle of butter or oil in the pan and the smell of fried eggs. I hope it is not for me because I am not hungry. I would like to have some ice to chew on though, to take away the thickness in my mouth.

I remember going to the city with her. So many roads joining, dividing, meeting up again: 'It's the city stretching its arms,' she said. 'You'll see, someday there will be no distinction between here and there, and we will be from the same place.'

It seems a good thing when things come together; water fuses to create lakes, trees to become forests; it is when things start dividing that the trouble comes. Like people. Like countries. Like war. Like faith. And fate. Like the cells in my body.

We spent our days wandering around the city, and I enjoyed the steady humming of the traffic, things were happening all around us. She took me to the Chinese quarter where we gorged on spring rolls and fish cakes that we ate with our hands, and that tea, what was is called again, the one with the rice ball inside, bubble tea, and we had our future told and she took me to the underground part of the city where more shops, more restaurants and movie theatres had mushroomed over the years in the dark and hot air of this sheltered place where people continued to hurry past, and still this steady humming of a busy life: a siren in the distance, a subway carving its way through the belly of this underworld, people running to a destination, even here something was always happening. I wanted to move here, where it was never silent. I wanted this very much.

But I never did. There was Frankie and the life I had here. And I stopped going to the city, and Sophia did not come here anymore and somehow along the way, we lost each other. Did we lose each other? Or was it something else? My head hurts so much now. I can't think anymore. Won't you draw the curtains for me? The light is hurting my eyes.

And as if he heard me he emerges from the kitchen, puts a plate of food in front of me, but I won't eat it. I wish for him to take me away to the familiarity of my room, but it is going to take a while because he'll be waiting for me to eat. It seems to be a game we play now; waiting on each other to see who is going to fold first. There is no doubt as to who is going to win the final round.

You can't taste food now because your numbed mouth is affecting your taste buds ability and you don't want to eat because it is like eating nothing. So I cooked a vegetable

curry and I added extra spices; cumin, aniseed, cinnamon, lots of chillies and it was so hot that my face burned. But you said: *I can taste it, I can taste it*, and you seemed so excited. And I gave you salted crackers that you licked because you could feel the salt grating on your tongue, and ice-cream, somehow, you like ice cream more than anything else. You wait until it melts and tilt your head back to let it run smoothly down your throat.

It is hard to have it right in my face, the fact of death, that nothing lasts, that I am not immortal. I heard two mothers talking the other day while they were walking in the street in front of the house. One was holding a baby.

‘Look how serious he looks, he seems so profound,’ she said.

They both laugh.

‘He is going to be a thinker this one, a philosopher perhaps, or a professor.’

It made me sad because, for once, I wished you would be able to tell me what you had dreamed for me, but it was also because they seemed terribly happy and I guess I was jealous of this.

Most of the days you stay in bed and I try to make it nice for you: I have put flowers on the shelf and I bring you tea, often, and a book, but most of the time, you just want to sleep. *Wher’ish Sophia?* you said. *Wher’ish she?*

Sophia is not coming. She still lives in the city and now occupies the position of head nurse at the main state hospital. I have gone over there a few weeks ago and I have seen her name on the board at the entrance. I walked the long corridor smelling the disinfectant and sat on one of the hard chair in the waiting room to wait. Wait. Wait until I would know what to do. Nurses came and went. And doctors, some walking, some rushing, it was strange to think that in this very place, at this very instant, there were births and death, like the sea coming and going, bringing kelp and sea shells onto the beach, and sometimes pulling back to take it all away. It must be full of ghosts here, and I looked around me, just to see, just to see if I would see them.

The answer did not come to me and I left. I could never tolerate hospitals very well, they made me anxious. I went onto the main road and it was busy and lively: animated terraces, packed restaurant, students, one of the university faculties was right there on the corner. I passed a theatre, a tea shop, a Vietnamese restaurant with colourful birds painted all

over the front door and someone pushed the door open and I peaked inside: it was full of people in their tidy work clothes coming from the nearby offices, there were bowls of rice and soup on the tables and the smell of fried oil and fish sauce. Next to it was an Indian place with a big flashy yellow sign, there too it was busy, and a little further I walked past a gelato stand where there was a long queue, all the way to the end of the street, and I walked and walked aimlessly until I was tired and I stopped to sit on one of those city bench. An old man in front of me was feeding the pigeons. A city is not a city if it does not have an old man feeding the pigeons. I watched him throw the bread crumbs, the birds circled him, there'll come back to shit on his head, or on mine.

When I took the road home dusk had already started to fall and the forest I was driving past, the sky—the clouds, all of this became one, all of this became darkness.

'How was your little trip?' Annabelle said when I came in the door. I had asked her to watch over you.

'It was alright,' I said, 'busy in the city.'

She does not know about Sophia I did not tell her. I wish that you would forget her. People always want to know the truth, no matter how much it hurts, but it is not always a good thing. Surely there are some stories that are better left untold. You should know this because you hate sad endings. And you don't have a choice. In the end, it is me who has control over your memories. Or parts of it at least.

So I did not answer you and you seem to be waiting everyday like a dog at a door, waiting for me to throw you a bone to chew on. But I won't tell you anything because it wouldn't do you any good, and there is enough doing you harm right now, enough dirt in your head.

I was allowed to stay home today and to play video games and mother heated up some soup for me and I ate while I sat on the couch. I mustn't do this again, mother said, I mustn't be afraid of dying like this.

'How is it? How is it to die?'

She said it is like going away, but for a very long time.

'Is he dead?' I said. 'Is daddy dead?' because he has been gone for a very long time, but she said it is not like this, it is only a part of you that goes away, but I could see her eyes were wet again, and I wondered if she was telling me a lie.

Because that is what she did before he left, she said: 'Go to sleep now,' but it was early, it was not even dark. 'We have to get up early tomorrow, because I'll take you to the beach' and I was so excited because I had never gone to the beach so I went to bed and closed my eyes. I was not tired so I did like mother told me to do: I pretended my eye-lids were glued together and I could not open them again. I kept them closed for as long as could, but I was scared, I must sleep, I must sleep. Something woke me up outside, a big roar, like a car that would not start, but then did. I jumped out of bed, I wanted to see if mother and father were asleep, but they were not because I could see light in the living room. Mother was sitting on the big chair, crying. 'Go to sleep,' she said. 'Go to sleep.'

As soon as it was light outside, I ran to their room and opened the door wide, but there was only mother in the bed and she was still sleeping.

'Are we going to the beach now? Where is daddy?'

'He had to go away,' she said, 'for work.'

'He is not coming to the beach with us?'

'My angel, come here. I am not feeling well you know, and I can't take you to the beach, but I promise, we will go another day. Another day.'

I hated it, to be manipulated like this, because that is what it was. It is just like when I fell on my arm at school and I had to go to the doctor because I was bleeding a lot, he said he had to stitch me up, like a doll.

'Won't that hurt?' I said.

'Not a bit, you'll see.'

But it was lie. A big fat lie.

I waited by the door the whole day, waiting for him to come back, but he didn't.

'He'll be gone for a while,' mother said, 'the work he took is far away.'

It has been months now, every day at school we write the date in our book and I know that it has been *months*.

'How far away is he?' I said because I thought maybe we could go see him. Maybe even take a plane.

'Don't be like this my angel, don't be like this.'

I can see her, Sophia, very elegant, a perfect posture, walking confidently across a room; men always turned around to look at her. It was because of her poise, the feeling of nonchalance; men are drawn by things like this. I always walked like a beaten soul, with my head sunk between my shoulders and it was pity men felt when they looked at me, or indifference. But all of this changed when you saw me, Frankie. You changed me and I walked with my head up. I wish we would go back there to this bar where it all first started, just for the sake of it.

You know I saw this man on TV the other day, an old man, with white hair and old skin, but he was dancing, dancing like a fool, and for a moment I thought it was stupid for him to dance like this because it looked so bad, but then I realised that we forget, Frankie, that once he had danced like this when he had brown hair and a smooth face and that perhaps for him nothing had really changed on the inside. Would you agree with this? For me it is different because I feel weak and pale and I know very well that I am not what I was and it is just going to get worse.

He tries to make it better this man that is taking care of me, but it is going to happen one way or the other. I may be dead by tomorrow, no one can tell. I wish I would die by the sea, it is a silly dream of mine, dream, as if death is something I aspire to, but it is not this, but if I have to go I always thought I would like it if it was by the sea. I don't know why, I suppose there is some kind of a cycle there, born in the water, returning to it, it seems logical to me, and this is where you had taken me Frankie. I can see the water running through our toes, cooling our skin, and the silence around us. You had taken me to the water. There was something about it, it was somehow more meaningful. We sat and were invaded by the presence of each other. And I knew what you wanted from me.

The man is not around; he is staying away. I think he can't bear looking at me, I can see it in his eyes. It is not only pity, he is disgusted. I refused to eat, and he took away the food without a protest. He has become methodical, almost mechanical: he gets me out of bed at seven, wheels me to the window, when the sun is high he moves me to the living room or sometimes outside if it is a warm day. Or if I ask for it, he brings me back to my room where I spend most of my time. He washes me in the evening, and puts a glass filled with ice next to my bed for the night so that if I am thirsty I can wet my lips and suck on the ice cubes. He doesn't want to leave water in case I wet the sheets. Once a week he changes the flowers in the room. I had poppies, but I did not like them because they attracted the bees when the window was opened and I had nightmares about it: bees chasing me around, my skin burning, and I would wake up sweating and terrified. And then I had lilies, and daisies. Now I have a pretty bunch of white and pink roses. But I can see he is removing himself and he almost does not speak to me anymore. So it is very silent in the house. And the girl has not come for a long time and I am even wondering if I had dreamed her, or if she is real.

I am tired like the rain outside; it is falling slowly, spitting really.

'Get away,' Annabelle said. 'For goodness sake, just go away.'

Maybe she is right and I should get away, because illness is ugly. It is very ugly. It is smelly and disgusting, and shameful. It is humanity becoming inhuman. And it is hard to be here. I have been the hero; no one can point a finger at me. But there are some days, some selfish days, when I want it to happen. Like today. Where I almost wish you would just die. Get on with it. So I don't have to stay here and ruin my life watching you throw up the food I have fed you, or soil your pants, or drool because the right side of your mouth is paralyzed and the soup is running down your mouth, staining your sweater, and then I have to bath your ugly body, all pale and wrinkly. Yes I wish I was not condemned to do these things anymore because it is making my life a living hell. A living hell. There I said it.

There are some days when wishing for the best or wishing for the worst seems to mean the same thing. Surely you don't want to go through all of this. You must have had enough too. You know I remember this dog that we heard wail for months because it was left alone outside. It was years ago during the autumn and we had some cold nights where there were even icicles in the window, and a wind that came right through the glass, or so it

seemed. And one night, the moaning stopped. We heard that the dog had run away or was freed, whatever—no one ever knew if it was someone who came to take it away or if it bit right through its leash, but the nights were silent again, and the whole neighbourhood was relieved. I am wondering if I think of this because I see you as the dog, or if it is me. You see, that is why it has to stop soon.

We have had a rainy summer and it's a shame for you I think. Your last summer and it's bad weather, it's a real shame. Now I'm remembering the summer we had a few years back: you in a bathing suit, Annabelle in a long shirt, it's sad really that she always wanted to hide like this, we were at the beach, well, not the real beach, a beach by a river, with pebbles, stones and grass, and fish in the water. Some people were fishing on the edge: 'Be careful,' you said, 'not to walk on a hook.' A man caught a rainbow trout, the skin sparkled under the sun and it was truly beautiful, really, I never thought I would find a fish beautiful. It was a big one and it took him a long time to bring it to the shore. We sat on a big rock, our feet in the water and Annabelle screamed because there was a leech stuck to her toe. You laughed like a little girl. 'You see Annabelle, everybody loves you.'

There are children outside in the street, and they are singing a song, but I can't quite hear what it is. You are sitting by the window again, your head against the glass, can you hear the words? Did you ever sing me lullabies when I could not sleep? You see, this I don't remember, and I wish that you could.

You know there was a coin on the pavement the other day while I was walking back from the nursery, it was right on the edge, as if someone had left it there purposely and I did not pick it up, just in case, I thought, that this was part of something bigger, a plan that could change my fate, this is the kind of stupid thing I do now, because I still can't believe that this is happening.

And I almost wanted to go to church the other day. I took the car and I drove past the church where we used to go. There was a crowd outside, some famous band was playing that night, it was strange for me and I almost wanted to scream at them saying, 'Hey, this is where I was christened, get out of here.' I don't know why, but I felt as if all of these people were intruding. I have never liked going to church much, you know this, but still it felt wrong to have all these people there. And that's the thing: everything feels wrong now because when

you have fate coming down on you like this you start to have your doubts about the world. You start to think that it matters if a book is on the wrong shelf, if things are not aligned or if you walked over a line in the pavement. You start believing in all of this.

You wanted to change into your floral dress and you looked at me almost defiantly, waiting. It's complicated you know, to dress you and see your dry skin, your pale wrinkly body: it is not so easy to touch you. I wanted to hire a nurse and I had one come over here for one day. She was dressed in a pale green apron and she seemed nice, she was not pretty, but she knew her way around: she pulled that dress from you as if it was nothing and she bathed you, scrubbed and polished every part of your body. She washed your hair too, laying your head gently onto her hands while she tipped water over you. I thought it must feel nice to be handled by someone so agile, but you did not want see her again. You said there were enough strange hands touching you—you were talking about me—and that it would have to do for now. So you fired her, said she was never going to lay another finger on you again.

You know what? You are going to stay in that dress today. It is a pretty dress, and the colour is nice, and it is not like you have to dress up for anything.

I'm going to shhee Shhophia, you said.

Ah. This was a sick joke. But you were serious, you stood up from your chair and crossed the living room shaking and wobbling but still, you held on, steadying yourself with your hand against the wall. Now, don't you do this, I thought, because it's difficult enough as it is. God, I didn't imagine you would make it, to open the door and walk down the steps, but there you were, at the bottom of the staircase ready for your little adventure. But of course, this is where it stopped. Soon enough you were on the floor, your head between your knees and that is when I came and lifted you back onto the wheel chair. I took you to your room.

I was angry with you. Why do you want to see her so badly? What about me? Can't you just focus on me? Look at me for goodness sake. The dimple in my cheek, my soft chin, the high arch of my eyes, does that remind you of nothing? Nothing at all? You always gave her too much attention; you spoiled her. She was so used to having you around no matter what, you listened to every word she had to say, and looked for her approval; you did nothing without her consent. So many times I have heard you speak to her with this soft little voice: *What do you think Sophia, what do you think?* What was it about her? The fact that you grew

up together? That she once stood in the way of some girls that wanted to rip your skirt and hit you in the face; she did not do it to defend you, she did it because she needed you.

As a boy I grew up with so much desire for Sophia that I almost became jealous of you for spending so much time with her. She became my muse, an ideal by which I was going to measure the beauty of women. She was behind all my ragged breathing, my flushed cheeks, and my moments of folly. But it changed one day and she became something else. A secret. A secret I had to keep from you. For your sake. Don't unearth what has been buried. This kind of secret only rots and gets uglier with time. You'll only find ghouls there.

I am Tom Sawyer. I take off my shoes, I walk barefoot. I pick a twig and chew on it. I will never go home again. And I will find you daddy, I will find you.

First I must think of where to go. Where did you go? Mother said it was away, far away, so I will walk along the highway because there are lots of cars driving on it, and maybe I will see you, and it goes all the way to the city and that is far away. So I walk and I walk and everywhere I look for you. The sun is hot on my cheeks and my throat is dry. I told mother I was going to Paul because she always says yes and she likes it when I go there because she does not always want me around. I know this because often she tells me: 'Go and play outside' and I know it is because she wants to cry again.

If I follow the highway, I know I can't get lost. We have driven on this road before, me and mother, when we went to the airport to watch the planes, but I slept most of the way so I don't remember everything, but I'm pretty sure that if I follow it, it will take me there. I know that the city is big and full of people and that is going to be difficult to find you, but at least I'm trying because I can't wait anymore.

It is a big walk and my feet hurt. Maybe I can play the cars game. One blue car, 3points. One white car, 1point. Another white car, 1point. And a red car, I am eliminated, but I have 5 points. One more time. One yellow car, 5 points, that's lucky. One, two, three white cars, 3 points. One blue car, 3 points. So now I have

eleven points, and there is another white car coming again. It is slowing down and stopping right next to me. A door opens and I am being pulled inside and pushed onto the front seat, my arms hurt, and the door is closed again and I hear the click of the lock .

‘What are you doing? What are you doing?’

Mother slaps me. My eyes prickle with tears and my cheek burns.

‘I am looking for father,’ I say. ‘I am looking for him.’

‘You can’t find him. You can’t find him. My angel, I know it hurts, it hurts me too, but you can’t do this, you can’t go looking for him. He is going to come back you know, he is going to come back.’

I am not sure if she is talking to me because she is not looking at me. She has stopped crying now and she rubs my cheek.

‘Let’s have some ice-cream ok; let’s go and sit by the river and have ice-cream.’

I am not hungry, but I don’t say anything. I will try again tomorrow, but this time I will run. I will run fast.

I can feel it coming, death running through me, I can feel it poisoning my blood; I never thought it would be like this, but I can feel it and I am scared. I look around me: the soft green hill, the warm sun rising behind the mountain, the dew on the leaves of the trees making them unreal, it can’t be all there is, surely, there must be something else after this. I don’t want to go to sleep for hundreds of years: I want to stay awake. The rain of yesterday has reached the river, the river flows into the sea, and the sea sweeps in and out onto the beach; you see that is how things are; they don’t just stand still.

I saw the fear in his eyes when he picked me up from the floor, but it was not so much because of my fall as where I wanted to go. The more he holds me back, the more I am like a child who can’t resist the urge to open the jack-in-the-box.

I always thought something would happen in this house. When I came in the first time I wanted to move here because of the mountain. Somehow it felt sheltered. And there was

the forest that ran all the way across town. I did it once: I walked for hours and when I came out from the woods I found myself standing on the edge of the highway, and still the woods extended further, probably all the way up to the city and it felt as if there was always a way out.

And there were the swallows in the roof. I thought it must be safe, that there can't be ghosts here if birds want to nestle in the roof. So we bought the house and we moved in almost immediately. It took some time for all the furniture to be brought in and the living room stood empty for a while. One night while I couldn't sleep because it was still all too new, I saw the light swarming in through the window: it lit the room strangely, as if something profound was going to happen, or to appear in the living room. The light came from the cross at the top of the mountain that had been erected a long time ago by the population to commemorate a holy celebration and it made it even more mystical. I always thought something was going to happen here.

And I have this memory now of this little boy with a witty laugh getting on a red bicycle, I am not sure, but I think it is here, just behind the hill. I am holding the back of the bicycle, keeping him straight and slowly I let my hands go and I hear him say: 'Mummy are you still holding me?' and I say yes, but it's a lie, I am running behind him now, and there he goes, riding on his own, holding on, holding on, and it is only when he looks back to see me that he falls in the gravel, scraping his knees. 'You said you were there, you said it,' and in his eyes there is the disappointment of a child, painful and too real.

Of course I wonder if this can be him, but at the same time I don't want it to be because it would be too tragic if it was, the fact that I can't remember you, my son. Sometimes things happen if one doesn't try too much, and just let it be, that is what is said about confidence and poise; one mustn't think too much or the pressure ruins everything. So, maybe one day it will just come back to me, him, Sophia, everything at once, and I hope it won't be too painful because I am not so good with pain, I am a fragile soul and I get hurt easily.

We are so different you and me: you can't tolerate silence, and I desperately look for it. I enjoy my days at the nursery because the flowers and the trees don't talk to me, and

some days when there are no clients; it is just me there, just me. I am not like you, the roar of the cars, the screaming of the birds; all of this is too much.

And these days you have been speaking so loudly, pronouncing the words badly, but still you shouted them at me and I said: 'I heard you. I heard you.' But still you just shouted the words at me, *give me this and give me that*, are you going deaf or is it just that silence is that painful for you now? I know you are in a lot of pain, even the water from the bath seems to hurt you, but it is true that water can carve paths into lands and polish rocks and it might just be that you have been on this earth a long time and the elements are after you; even a soft wind seems to be able to blow you away like a leaf on the porch, or a page from a book.

Annabelle doesn't come here anymore. She is too scared to look at you because now the fact of your illness is written all over you. There is even a lingering smell in the house, and it is not just a bad smell, you know how it is, it is something more than this, it is the smell of someone dying. So she just ignores my messages and it seems she has dug herself a hole where she has buried her head and her conscience and is determined to stay away until it happens, until she gets the phone call, but what will she do then because it will be too late to catch up, too late for anything at all. But I think she feels it is not really you anymore, that her mother has been long taken away.

It is strange that you could be so strong with her, with us, but not with Sophia. Around her you were only a shadow. She manipulated you and lived off your admiration; women like this need someone like you around them. I guess it is why you behaved the way you did with Annabelle; you exerted your power where you could and with Annabelle it was easy. And that is why she revolted so much against you, and against herself too.

You know that this man, Peter, came to see me at the nursery. He wanted help for his garden, but it was also because he couldn't get Annabelle out of his head. It is this magnetism of her, and the beauty. So he wanted to see her again and I didn't know what to do because she would not have wanted me to tell him, but at the same time it was not good for her to be all alone like this. So I did, I told him where she lived and he went to see her, and when I went to his home I said: 'How did it go with my sister?'

He did not say anything at first, but I was insistent.

'She's pretty,' he said, 'but she's a hell of a case.'

Later I learned that she invited him in and she seduced him and when it was all finished she made him dress before taking the sheet from the bed and washing everything.

‘It was like she was ashamed of me,’ he said, ‘and I felt like a fool.’

You asked about Sophia again. I have already told you that I am not going to let you do this, and for her to ruin your life again. I am going to stand in your way and you will hate me for this, but you hate me already, so you see, it is just going to be this way. I am going to throw away everything that can remind you of her: the pictures, the books she gave you, the blouse, the frame, and the letters. And the truth is that she knows you are dying, I am almost convinced of this. You know that news travels easily. But you see, she is not going to come for you. She has no use for you now.

There is loud music coming from your room and I go to you because I would like for you to put it softer, you know I get headaches too. I find you sitting on your bed with your hair resting loosely over your shoulders. You have removed the pins I put in your hair to hold in a bun. I did it because I thought it would please you; Annabelle used to do this for you. With your hair like this you look like a little girl. An old little girl. And it is uncanny to look at you.

I went back to the woods, not far, just at the edge, and something flew very fast around me settling on the ground, just for a few seconds, and then it was gone. At first, I thought it must have been a humming-bird because I have heard they are tiny little birds, the smallest of birds in fact. But then, I had my doubts, because this was tiny, hardly bigger than a fly.

I thought about fairies, but I am not a girl and I know these are stupid tales. Magic does not exist. At Halloween a few girls in my class always dress up like fairies and go around the class with a wand in their hand pretending they can turn the other girls into princesses and make the boys they like fall in love with them. It’s stupid.

‘Hey do you want me to make your freckles disappear?’ a girl once said to Paul.

She tapped her wand twice.

'Sorry there are too many of them!' she said and gave him a smirk.

Later when I sat next to her I noticed she had dark hair at the top of her lip and it almost looked like a little moustache.

'Hey Sandy,' I said. 'Looks like you made a mistake with your wand and turned yourself into a boy!'

She turned to me with a very serious look on her face, but she said nothing. Her eyes were wet. I did not say anything else afterwards.

The woods got cold, and the further I went, the thicker it became, tall trees blocking the light and strange noises. I thought I would have been able to run this time, but my legs were shaking and I could not carry on like this. So I went back home and found mother in the living room unaware that I had almost run away once again.

'How was Paul?' she said.

She was reading a book.

'Paul is fine,' I told her and went to my room.

I cannot stop thinking about this bird. Maybe I imagined it, my mind playing tricks, or it is a sort of bird I don't know about. But still. It might have been real. And if it was I wonder if it is a sign, and perhaps it means that I can make a wish and that this time it will come true.

The spectators were praising me. I could hear them shouting my name with a never-ending roar. All of sudden, it became louder. I glanced at the wall and saw that it was trembling like leaves on a windy day. The people disappeared, but the echo of their thunderous applause still resonated in my ears. The door burst open and a swarm of crickets invaded the space. Thousands of them nibbled at the material of the chairs and curtains. The buzzing noise rose to a shrill. My body itched. I tried to scratch my legs but even my eager fingers could not relieve me. They crept over my face and into my nose. I tried to strike them with the back of my hand, but I missed every time. It was as if my hand did not make contact at all. Then, the vision went away and the surrounding darkness subsided into

a muddled orange shade. I did not know if my eyes were open or not. All I could see was a flow of orange lights in different shades intertwining as if liquid.

I woke up drenched in sweat. It is because of the poppies again: I have told him not to bring them to me because of all the bees. They buzz around my head and it gives me nightmares. But I guess dreaming is a good thing, even if it's bad dreams because it means I am alive. Although all of this could be my hell: crickets around me, eating me from the inside. Yes, there is a theory that advances the idea that we all have our personal hell. Our very own ending. But this seems rather selfish to me, quite egocentric in fact. And of course there is also the one that says that hell is actually on earth. I guess I will know about all of this soon enough.

I started to write him a letter, but the task was demanding because my hands are too stiff and also I did not know what to say. I started with 'to you' because 'to my son' would have been all too sudden and fake. And 'you' was also in a way personal, it was better than 'to whom this may concern' I guessed, and I did not want to put too much distance between us since we had long passed the limits of modesty him and I; he had seen me naked in the bath so many times and had been forced to see so much more too.

I said that first of all I wanted to express my immense gratitude for all that he had done. I am quite aware that it is not an easy task to nurse someone like me. Someone who is so stubborn, but it was because I felt that with everything that was happening to me I deserved the things to be done my way. And then I wanted to talk about him and this feeling I had every time I looked at him because it was like having a word on the tip on your tongue, only it was painful. Too painful for me to think about it, about him, too much. And I was sorry for this, that is what I wanted to say, but I didn't finish the letter. My hands were getting cold outside the blanket and sore, and I dropped the pen on the floor and I did not have enough strength or will to pick it up again.

So there will be a lot of things left unsaid. He once told me it was not a bad thing. I wonder if he would still believe this if he knew I wanted to tell him all of this: that he was not a complete stranger to me, and that I am almost sure now that he was right, that he was my son. Would he still believe that forgetting is not a bad thing?

I have moved your bed into the living room where I can keep a closer eye on you. Your breathing has become heavy and you cough a lot; there is the underlying threat that you might drown yourself. You let too much saliva build in your mouth and it prevents the air from flowing freely in and out of you, so you see, it is true what I say; you might choke on water. And now every time you ask for the bathroom it is often too late and I can see the shame in your eyes, and I try to look away, but I have to change you, pull the soiled clothes off you and it is just becoming worse this everyday performance of disgrace. I don't bath you anymore, the task is too strenuous, I used a cloth and a bucket of water, that will have to do for now.

I have asked Annabelle to come because it is not fair for me to go through all of this on my own and she needs to try at least. I am expecting her to arrive tomorrow morning, but I can't be sure, she might turn around half-way, you know how it is with her, and she still refuses to acknowledge where this is all going. But if she would only see you now: your skin has gone bad, it is red and swollen, a side effect of the medicine you take and you can almost not move at all, it happened yesterday. Things are happening quickly now, the tumour is blocking the messengers going to your brain and your body does not respond anymore, you are condemned to stillness. It is strange this because you once told me that your life was a rollercoaster going too fast and you wished for it to come to a stop and for you to be able to take a good look at what was going on around you. I am sorry for this, I did not mean it was you who caused all of this, but I suppose it is just too much, as it has been said: one should be careful about what one wishes for.

I am not sure if I can, and if I will keep you here with me for very much longer because it is hard for me, this constant attention, to listen for your breathing, to make sure you are alive. I can't bear the idea of having you dying next to me. It might be the very wish of a lover, or someone else, but it is not mine. So we will see.

And I have not told you, but I did not turn away the offer. I have spoken with the owner and I am getting ready to go overseas. He would like me to leave in a few weeks, and I dare not say that I think it might give me enough time, that it is a question of days for you now. Surely you can understand that I would want to go away after this, just to distance myself for a while. Don't think less of me because of it, but I have been seeing a lot of shadows lately.

And I will have to deal with your inheritance. Your wealth and the house are going to Annabelle and me. That is simple enough. Annabelle already told me that she does not want the house. And I am not sure if I want it either. I have decided I am not going to let you die here, but it's not only this; the past is waiting at every corner. So we have already agreed that perhaps the best thing is to sell it and split the money. It would give me a head-start for Europe and Annabelle would like to move to the city.

But there is all the rest. Some old cousins of yours already put their names behind some paintings in the living room. It was some years ago when you were hospitalized because of a bad cold that threatened to turn into pneumonia. They came to see you and I saw them sneaking around the house, scribbling their name behind the portraits as if we children would not have the last word on this. Where are they now? They are staying away, too old to move around, but also too afraid of seeing death staring at them, straight into their eyes. But they'll be back soon enough, you'll see.

And there is the old Indonesian cabinet in the living room. Father inherited it from his father, and after his death, father's sister phoned me because she wanted to have it back because surely she was the next of kin as his sister, and I said that there was you and that father had left it to you. She agreed to wait. That is what she said. She did not say until you died, but this what she meant. So I am expecting her to come here anytime soon. You see, it is going to get busy here. Death does not only bring silence, it brings ghosts too.

Today is the best day of my life. The blue Toyota is back in our driveway. My dad is back. He picked me up and twirled me around.

'Jeez you're tall now,' he said.

He brought me gifts; a soccer ball, a game boy, and a red t-shirt that said 'Florida' on it.

'What does it mean Florida?'

'It is the name of a place,' he said, 'where there is a vast ocean bordering the land, and swamps with crocodiles and shops with caramel-coated apples, and vanilla flavoured jelly beans, and when the sun is so hot that oranges grow in gardens.'

'Really? And you were there?'

'I was there.'

I had been very sad since he was gone, but now I know why he had wanted to be in a place like this because at this moment I very much wanted to go where there were vanilla flavoured jelly beans and orange trees.

'Are you going to take me there?'

'Maybe someday,' he said. 'Maybe someday.'

He gave flowers to mother and she smiled a little. I thought she would have been happy that he was back, she had cried so often.

'Supper is ready,' she said.

We ate pea soup with cheese and bread my mother had baked herself. The crust was golden and crispy, and it was delicious, but I could not stop thinking about those caramel-coated apples and jelly beans.

'Do you think we can find it here mother? Do you think we can find a shop that sells it?'

'I don't know my angel. Eat your soup.'

After, she wanted me to go to sleep.

'But I am not tired,' I said.

And I did not want to go to sleep and for my father to be gone like it happened last time. I was going to trust no one now.

It is you, isn't it? The boy in my dream, I know it is you. I can see it now. And the picture, I know why I can't bear to look at it and why this woman is chasing me in some of my dreams. This woman you see, she has taken something away from you. Something that would have been mine too in a way and that would have been all of us. And I am running away from her because I have seen it. Perhaps, I am running away from you too.

She was pregnant. I saw her lying on the bathroom floor shaking and sobbing as if she was in deep pain. She was with child. And I knew almost immediately from the way she bent down over the toilet and stuck her fingers into her throat to throw up some more that she wanted it out of her.

I saw the change in her. Suddenly she could not bear the smell of anything because everything made her sick. Did you not see the way she walked away from our days at the lake because of the smell of rotting grass and dirty water mixed with the smell of the ice-cream from the children eating cones on the rock, and it was the sight of them that made her distraught too. And she was always tired, her complexion was pale, she had dark circles under her eyes. She could not tolerate screaming and dogs barking because all the sounds resonated too loud inside her. And sometimes a rush of desperation assailed her and pain shot through her body and all she wanted to do was to lie on the floor and cry. The world was suddenly hostile; you see that is what happens when you are with child and it takes some time getting used to.

And she tried everything she could. She thought that if she wanted it enough it might go away. I saw her drinking gin by the bottle, and running around the field until she was so exhausted that she could barely breath or stand up, and she lay in hot baths until her face burned and added even more hot water and stayed still and I would find the mirror covered in steam and it would be like hell in there; you saw nothing of this. But it wouldn't surrender so easily. You see that is the thing with children; they are always stronger than we think.

And then the colour came back to her cheeks and she smiled again, a weight had been lifted from her and I knew it was gone; she had gotten rid of it. And if she seemed relieved for a while the guilt was to come, and it did, like a strange mist over a mountain, I saw it taking possession of her. She pulled away from you telling you she didn't belong here and she wanted to go away. She was fleeing; did I not tell you this? She wanted to be in a place that wouldn't remind her of it. She wanted to be somewhere where there wouldn't be so many ghosts.

So she left and led you to believe that it was about discovering herself. But you see, it was the exact opposite; she knew too well who she was. And you were in the middle of all of this, ignoring what had been ripped away from you. I could not tell you: I was too afraid of what it would have done to you, so I carried the secret and I wonder now if this is what poisoned me, if the weight of this knowledge in my head somehow became this tumour. But now it is too late already, it has mixed with my blood and my soul and it would not do any good to tell you the truth now.

And I think I know about Sophia. You have been sheltering me from the truth. Don't do it because I wouldn't want for it to poison your blood too. You must forgive and let it flow out of you. It is strange all of these memories coming back to me, is it my life being projected before me? Or is it that the swelling in my brain has gone down and is allowing me to think clearly again? Maybe I'm all wrong after all and death is not what I thought it is. Is it that the soul leaves the body it was given at birth, but continues to exist? And am I out of myself yet? It's difficult to say because I have not been able to feel my body lately so there is no way to tell. I suppose I will know if I look into your eyes. I can still see the pain, and the tiredness of having to take care of a sick old woman. I guess it means I am still alive.

Once father brought you lilies. The vase sat on the kitchen table for weeks, and every time I entered the room I was invaded by their smell, strong and overpowering at the same time, but after a while, I could not smell them anymore. Only if I left the room and then returned, their scent came back. Eventually they wilted and you threw them away. The room felt strangely hostile afterward because suddenly I could smell the dampness seeping from the wall, the vegetable peels rotting in the bin, the coffee stain on the carpet.

It is like this with you. Every time I leave the house and come back, I am surprised to find you. As if during this short while when I was gone I had forgotten you were here or I had wanted to forget. And when you will be gone I know there will be this strange hostility around me.

You keep watching me as if I am going to disappear or become something else. And I have seen pain in your eyes, but there were no tears. Is it possible that you cannot even cry anymore? I have phoned Annabelle again urging her to come. I am having you transferred to the hospital and that is what I told her, because the truth is I really can't have you die here.

And it is difficult to know what you need: you don't talk anymore, and you can't swallow very well, if at all, so the doctor said I must bring you in so they can feed you. I know you don't like the idea of having tubes coming in and out of your mouth, and needles pricking your skin, but just pretend it is something else, that you are going on a dive and the oxygen mask is your tank or that you are flying up to the moon, in a rocket, and there is no

food there, so you must be plugged in. I am sorry if it seems childish all of these stupid ideas, but I guess I need the fairy-tales.

When I told you about the hospital you opened your eyes wide and then they were normal again and I hope it means you understand. I have done all I could, but now it is time for me to move on. I am sorry for this, but I am sure you can see this is all too much for me, and you will be more comfortable there: they'll wash you properly and if you are in pain they have ways of shooting medicine right into your blood. You see, you might even prefer it and wish for me to have brought you there earlier. And I'll come often, every day, and I'll continue to read to you and show you pictures and talk and I'll hold your hand and Annabelle will come too and she will wash your hair. I'll bring your jewellery and your make-up, and the green dress, and anything that you want. Is there anything else that you want?

I have packed a suitcase for you, the brown leather one with the red scarf tied to the handle, the one you always took when we went to the beach. I have put a blanket inside and I will bring your pillow because I know how much you don't like to sleep in someone's else bed. I thought about putting in a picture of me and Annabelle, but I didn't because I did not want it to distress you. I have tried enough and I want peace for you now. The blanket I picked is one of father's. His smell is still in it, and I don't believe this will bring you anguish. I rather think it will appease you, even make it feel as if he is here, wrapped around you, holding you in his strong arms. This is what you want after all. And you have been calling for him again. I heard you speaking to him saying that he was beautiful like this. Perhaps you have been really seeing him and I am the fool who did not believe you. Because I do believe in ghosts, but only the bad ones it seems.

He is back and I must be the happiest person, but mother is still crying. I know father slept on the couch last night, and I thought he might have been sick because I have slept there once and it was because I had a big fever and mother wanted to keep an eye on me, but he wasn't sick and mother slept with her door shut.

And yesterday he came into my room without knocking and he caught me doing something I did not wish for him to see. Lately I have wanted to do it a lot. Later, he wanted to see me and I knew that he wanted to talk about what happened. He asked me if I had seen people doing this before. He wanted to know if I had seen it on TV or somewhere else, and if I knew what this was.

I first learned about sex with cats. At Jenny's house, she has a cat named Sammy and once I was at her place for her birthday party and her cat kept moaning and rubbing itself everywhere and she said it was because her cat was on heat. I was fascinated by this and I followed the cat restlessly and if I tried to pat the cat's back or something, it moaned and stretched on the floor and rubbed his back and it would just keep doing this. Later I saw her cat again, and another cat was on her back and I knew what was happening, and I could not stop looking. It went on for a while and I watched until I was called back to the party.

But I didn't tell him about the cat, because I knew that is not what he wanted to know. He wanted to know about him, if I remembered. And I did. I had not forgotten like he asked me to, but I did not tell him because I did not want to make him angry and for him to leave us again. So I just said that I was a man now, and he looked at me with a quizzical look and brushed my hair and said: 'I have forgotten how grown up you are now.' And he left the room.

Sleep. Sleep. Child sleep. Sleep is going to slip, slip, slip inside you. Sleep. Sleep. Child you must sleep. I have this song in my head now and I don't know if I am singing it for you or for myself. I need peace now. And silence. I never thought I would wish for this, but here I am because my head hurts terribly, and it is getting so heavy, too heavy, and I wish I could just lay it on the table, on the table, like this book, or this little box. I wish I could drill a hole and let it to flow out of me: all the poison and the bad memories, and you Sophia, you, I want it all out of me.

I planted a sunflower for Frankie, because he died. I don't know when this was, but I know that one afternoon I was sitting on the porch and sadness rushed into me and I could think clearly once again. It is like this with the tumour, there are some days which are better

than others, and I took some seeds from the shed and I planted them for him. And the flowers broke out from the soil and there was a dog that kept coming into the garden to pee next to it; so I put up a little fence around it to keep the dog away.

I have a clear vision of Sophia standing in the frame of the door, her eyes fixed on me. She would not look away, but she told me. I wonder what it meant to her. Was it only that the occasion presented itself or was it something more than this? And did she think about me? Was there a time when she saw my face and felt some kind of guilt or sadness for what she was about to do, or what she had done? Surely she must have had some ghosts in her head too. Or was I only an instrument for her, something from which she sucked all her pride and confidence, leaving me empty. Empty like the shells I found on the beach that used to have little hermit crabs inside, but were abandoned, and people crushed them under their feet and over time the shells would become sand, grains of sand that slipped through fingers. That is what I thought for a while, that I was not worthy. But I forgave him for everything. I guessed I thought that I was lucky that he came back. Girls are silly. And I loved him. I love him.

It was very distressing at first to have all these memories escaping me, but after a while it did not matter anymore. I should not have complained so much because it sheltered me from all of this, all the pain. My head is like a glass snow-ball: if no one does anything it is a quiet day in the snowman's world, but if someone shakes it a little, the snow lifts from the ground and there is a storm again.

And this is why I won't tell you about Claire. Because there is nothing you can do to change this, nothing will bring back what she has taken away. And there will only be anger and silly delusions about what it could have been. And you'll feel guilty. You'll convince yourself that you must have done something wrong, but this isn't true. You can't be responsible for others like this. Even me, you can't be responsible for me. You have done too much for me already, trying to forget things that were unforgettable.

PART THREE

So it is done and they came to fetch you in the afternoon to transfer you to the hospital: a whole swarm of white-uniformed nurses and caretakers to take you away with masks and gloves and long aprons as if you were some kind of dangerous animal they approached carefully, quickly lifting you onto the stretcher. I suppose it just reminded them too much of what we are made of to see a body decay like this and that is why they looked away.

I have removed the sheets from the couch and the pillows and put everything in the room the way it was. But the smell of illness is still lingering, it is something that will take some time to disappear.

They put you in a private room, you should be grateful for this they said, because this is royal treatment. They give you everything now, anything you want like a prisoner on death row. It is a question of days; that is what it all means.

Annabelle is taking the bus this evening and she will be here in the morning. I spent the whole afternoon by your side, but a nurse said I should go home because they would phone me if there was any change. Change. As if this was possible now.

An old classmate of yours came to see you. A nice lady, but I did not know how to handle it, to make small talk while I have you die in front of me. I think I might have been too raw with her. She spoke to you about her work and the rainy summer and the flood. It has rained so much that the water from the lake came right over the bridge and it was closed for two days redirecting all the traffic around the town. She said: 'How is she?' because you could not talk to her, you can't speak at all now. I said that the tumour was very big and that is why you can't talk, and eat, and move,— 'you see the pan under the bed'—and that you were in so much pain and I pointed at your blue arm where all the needles had been pricked into your skin and she got up, wished me strength and left. I might have been rude, but at the same time, she asked me how you were, and I told her exactly this. I am in no state of mind to play games and tip-toe around people.

So I went back home and it was strange to have nothing to do at all but wait. Wait for you to die. I can't believe what I am thinking, but what else is there? It is a certainty and it is

a matter of time. I suppose it is true for all of us, but for you it is just that it is going to happen rather sooner than later. So I sit on the chair, I can't sit on the couch, it still smells of you, now imagine if you would have died here. I pour myself a glass of whiskey, and I wait.

I came home because I fought with Paul and when I entered the house I heard the hush of voices and I saw the light in your room and I wanted to run to you to tell you what happened to Paul.

I opened the door and I saw you, naked, lying on top of a woman and when she heard me she lifted herself onto her shoulders and I saw the long yellow hair and dark eyes staring at me, and I recognised her, Sophia, sweet Sophia, and I knew exactly what this was, because I am a man. I am a man. I closed the door. And you called for me, but I did not reply. I am a man. I am a man.

I ran to the woods and hid there for a long time. I sat on the rock and I can't remember if I fell asleep there, but it seems as if I stayed there a long time. And then I heard some voices, people coming, laughing and drinking, I could hear the sound of bottles shuffling in a bag and I was scared and I did not want them to find me. So I ran out of the forest, down the hill, and I came back. I was expecting mother to be back home, but she was not, and father was waiting for me sitting in the living room. He stood up when I crossed the door and took me aside and said softly: 'Son there are some things you might not understand.'

But this was not true, I understood everything. He asked me to forget, to not think about it anymore. And to not tell mother.

A few weeks later, he left, and I thought he would never come back. But he is here now and I am prepared to say nothing, and continue trying to forget because I would like for him to stay. I would like this very much.

It was so hot in this truck that I thought I was being manhandled into hell. A white hell. With a nurse with long legs and a starched blouse that was rough on my skin when it brushed against my arm and a man with a hair on his chin, for goodness sake just get this hair out of my face. We took a few corners and every time I wobbled on the stretcher, like a doll, the man with the hair held me.

They took me to the city. I could hear it when we got there, all the noises: a siren in the distance, the horns, the traffic, the shuddering of a train passing nearby, the wind trapped between the buildings. Where is the hospital? Did I ever see it when I was here? Is it close to the square or is it on the outskirts? What kind of view will I have there? Will I still be able to see the mountain? Because they should have told me. I would have taken a good look at it if I am to not see it again.

They opened a window and I could smell fresh-baked bread and I thought we must be close to the Jewish quarter where they sell bagels in the street. What day is it today? It seems busy because there is a constant humming of traffic. Perhaps it is rush hour and people are hurrying home. There is the smell of the exhaust-fumes, harsh and scratchy, and something else too, sweet and sugary, cotton candy from the sugar factory. It is a strange mix, a bit like death I assume; bitter and sweet.

Between St-Laurent and St- Catherine Streets there is a market every Saturday morning and sometimes I went there with Sophia and we walked through the rows of fresh vegetables and fruits, and seeds, and spices, and there was a stall where a man sold cherry and apple tobacco imported from Turkey and Sophia always liked to buy it. She did not smoke, but she liked the smell of the wet tobacco.

But we are not stopping close to the market, we are driving further and further away and the thought hits me that I will never see these things again because I am on my way to die. And I would like for them to stop and let me consider all of this for a while and I look at the man and I blink my eyes twice, and again, but he doesn't understand that I have something to say, or he doesn't care, and we are on our way, further, and further away. Wait. Just wait. And as if I was answered we stopped and I am being heaved out of the ambulance and wheeled inside the hospital. It is too late for anything now.

I see him at the counter; they did not allow him in the ambulance. He is busy signing papers and we passed right next to him, but they didn't stop. We take the elevator and go up ten floors, we are so high that I can see clouds streaming past the window and I think this will be a pretty view. Only this is all there is, just clouds. They lift me onto the bed. It is a pretty room with a green walls and a vase with flowers. Is it for me or was it left behind by someone else? They undress me and slip a thin blouse over my head and push a pan under my bed, and I see where this is all going. So this is it. My last station. An empty wall, over washed sheets and a pan under my bed like a tooth under a pillow. Now you tell me, what kind of fairy is going to come after this?

Night has fallen and still Annabelle is not here. She said she was going to phone me when she would be at the station, but perhaps she will take a taxi. Or it might be that she is not coming at all.

I said I like silence, but it is not true. I always feared what I would find once you would be gone from the house. Now I know; my ear rings like after a blow. I have made the bed in your room, but I have left everything else as it was. Your coat lies on the chair, and your old hats hang on the little hooks above your desk, but for one that has fallen on the floor: the red one with the little fishnet at the front. I remember you wearing it. It made you look like a grand dame, and it was really impressive for a boy my age who already thought his mother was a queen. Annabelle used to dress up in your clothes, walking around in your high heel shoes, wrapping herself in your scarf, powdering her nose and even putting on blue eye-shadow like you did. She wanted to be you.

I don't know what I am to do with all your things. I guess I could give it to charity, but it feels strange this idea that your clothes could be worn by someone other than you. I know they are nothing, just fabric and threads, but still it is hard not to be sentimental about it. I suppose it is not better than ending up in the dustbin rotting with apples and bad meat. Still.

And I have found a crumpled sheet under your desk. I don't know why, but I unfolded it and I saw it was a letter for me. I tried to read it, but your handwriting has always been difficult to read and it was clear by the way the letters were formed that it has been done

by a weak and shaky hand. I can only imagine that it must have been painful for you to even try to attempt to write it because lately you could not even hold a glass of water in your hand, never mind a pen. I guess that is why you did not finish it.

I could read that you were trying to apologise to me. I shall not accept this. I feel I am the one to blame and that I could have done more for you. I feel guilty for all those selfish thoughts I had about wanting freedom. I am not the one dying. It was awful to see you being lifted on the stretcher, a helpless body, heavy and stiff; for a moment I had a vision of you dead. At one point I wanted to tell them to stop and leave you here, but I convinced myself that it had to be this way. And I had told you they were coming. I had explained it to you that it had to be like this. I wanted to drive with you, but they would not allow me into the ambulance so I followed you from behind. Did you see me? I was there mother. I was there.

Now it is almost nine o'clock and still nothing from Annabelle. I watch the door as if it is going to open by itself. I even get up and make sure there is no one there because it has started to rain outside and it might be that the soft sound of a little knock could be muffled by the rain striking the metal roof. I press my face against the glass, but there is no one waiting outside, just a dark sky.

When we were children Annabelle and I played this game: when night had fallen I would take her to the woods, not far, and I would ask her to close her eyes while I hid among the ferns and the bushes, and then she would have to try to find me. There were lots of fireflies over there during the summer-time and I brought a torch and from time to time I would flash it and to find me she would have to look for the bigger circle of light among the twinkle of the fireflies. I was much older than her and she felt safe enough to be in the woods with me, and it was never really dark with all this light around us. In fact it was truly amazing all these flashing lights in the field, surreal, as if it was a magic place. At some point I had even told her that the fireflies were fairies and she would go looking for them, trying to catch one.

I can see her now standing in front of the door, packing and unpacking her suitcase, laying the clothes on the table, folding and unfolding. She is too scared to come here. She is afraid that it might seal the deal, and that by staying away she is buying you time because you

might hold on for her. Hold on until she comes. I told her it was not going to be this way, but she is stubborn.

I am going to sleep now. Maybe she has taken the night bus and she is going to be here in the morning. The rain has stopped and I can hear the calls of the crickets in the garden. A soft repetitive tune. And soon it is all I hear. Or is it that my ears are ringing again?

You're a mother now. That is what people told me when you started developing inside of me. You're a mother now. Yes, I remember. I wanted something else. I needed something else. I wanted to travel, or I wanted to start a little farm stall on main road. I wanted to be free like her, like Sophia. I wanted something that would have only been mine because children belong to no one but themselves—that is why you didn't have to stay if you didn't want to, but you did. You did my angel.

'What's wrong with you?' everybody said. 'What's wrong with you?'

Even Frankie said it. That's right. Just before he went away. You're a mother now, he said. I hated and loved him for this. I was a mother, yes. But it was an accusation as much as a praise. And you see: love and hate don't mix well. They create poison.

My angel. I can feel it coming. Don't be too sad, and don't cry for too long. Tears will help you free yourself from the pain, and perhaps the guilt, but they never resolve anything, this is a lesson I learned too well. You must let go, that is what you must do because this is what I should have done, forgive. Forgive Sophia, and your father because even if I thought that I had, I did harbour some rage and resentment. And perhaps I should have forgiven my mother too because they all stayed in my head for too long, knocking inside it, wanting to get out. But I kept them in and look what they did too me. Bad ghosts do bad things.

And protect your sister from herself, help her to be free. I don't know if it is my fault, and if I was too strong with her. Or I protected her too much. Tell her babies are born in blood, and in pain, and sometimes even in shit. It seems crude this, but this is the truth of what we are and she should not be afraid of it. I certainly had to learn to let go of all this

false pride, or I would have left this earth much sooner than this. I always only wanted the best for her. The truth is that I have always been afraid to disappoint her.

And my angel, I am sorry that you have been in the middle of all of this. But you are a strong boy, strong, you have always been much stronger than me, and if you let it all go now, you will survive. Remember the deer? Shake my angel, shake and let it all out. Greed is what got me, keeping too many memories and hatred is never a good thing. Never a good thing. Let everything go as if it were a bad wave in the sea—the sea that you love so much. It is when you stand too close to where a wave breaks that it comes crushing on your head. Stay away from it and look to the horizon.

The clouds are gone now and it is a clear blue sky before me and I can see the yellow field running down from the window, and a little girl riding a red bicycle down the little hill. She is ringing the little bell because she likes to hear it, and she is not going to fall, watch her, she is not going to fall. There is the smell of freshly cut hay and I can see the haystacks in the field like little fat yellow sheep standing still. And I am driving further and further down the hill and there is a warm wind on my skin, I can feel it.

At the bottom a house is waits, all painted in blue and it is quite a contrast with the green grass around it. I hear a noise like a little engine and I know it comes from a coffee grinder crushing the beans and there is also the smell of fresh coffee coming from under the door and I can see through the door: behind it is a man pouring hot water into a mug. He has the skin of someone that spends his days outside and I recognised him, I am coming Frankie. I am on my way.

She came too late. She arrived late in the evening and placed her luggage on the floor and she was going to drive to the hospital in the morning. But we got the phone call in the middle of the night. A woman asked to speak to me and she used my full name, and it was hard to hear this news from someone using such formalities. Annabelle knew it too when she heard the phone ring because phone-calls in the middle of the night are always what we think they are; they are like an owl on the roof or a bird hitting the window.

I will have you buried under the purple flowers next to father. I don't know what I am to do now. Try to forget, not think about it or just let it go. Because I know that if I leave

as much as a trace of it in my soul it will grow and bloom; it will resurface and take the oxygen out of me, and the warmth, and it will take me away as it did for you.

So I will try not to make the same mistake, and let it flow out of me—all the rage and the guilt and everything I have once tried to forget. I will try to be free of all of this. In fact, my plane leaves just after the funeral. It was the best thing to do, and I wanted to avoid all the chaos and the gossip and the fights that follow a death. I'm tired. After all it has been a long journey for me too.

Annabelle is doing as she planned and she is moving to the city. I am not certain, but I think your death might have freed her. I am not saying that this is what she wanted, but it seemed to have forced her to deal with herself. And you know that she touched you. When we went to the hospital to pay our respects before they moved your body, she took a good look at you. At first it was a light touch, just the brush of her fingers against your arm, but then she let it all go—all the fears and the inhibitions and she took you in her arms and she said you were still warm. She combed her fingers through your hair and she kissed your forehead. I think she will be fine. They'll be no ghosts coming to haunt her; she has had the strength to say goodbye.

For me, I only wished I would have been there. You know that is always how I pictured it: I would be holding your hand and you would close your eyes slowly. But you died alone. And I just hope you were not too scared. I think you knew it was going to happen this particular evening, and yet you did nothing to hold me back, you were brave. You gave me an embrace and I felt all the love of a mother for a son. You said: 'My angel, don't be afraid.'

Mother's tummy has swelled like Jonathan's mother and I am not scared to touch it because it is my little sister in there. I pat her stomach gently while she lies on the couch, and together we sing a song to rock her to sleep when she moves too much.

Father told me I mustn't fear going to sleep because he is going to stay. We spend a lot of time together now: he takes me hunting with him and one day I will be allowed to hold the gun and shoot something, but not now he said, not yet. He picks me up from school and we drive in his blue car and I can sit on his lap and hold the wheel. He said he is going to take me to the airport because he is sad that he has missed it. He said he is sad to have missed a lot of things. I even let him walk me all the way to class because I don't care what others think anymore.

And he is going to teach me to swim like a fish in the river. He said I will learn how to do breast-stroke, and the butterfly, and how to hold my breath for a very long time and with this I will never have to be afraid of drowning. So here I am, one, two, three, and I sink my head into the water, it is silent, but I am not afraid because he is there and I hold my breath as long as I can. As long as I can.

THE END

University of Cape Town